

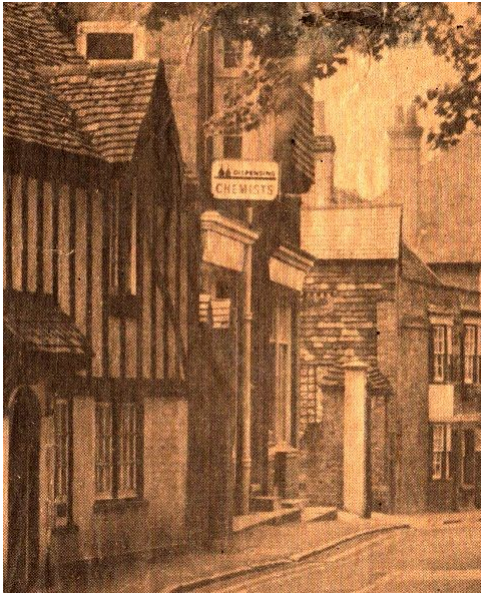
# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - January 2014

### Fred Freeman - Life as the Village Chemist

In January, Fred Freeman gave a most enjoyable account to the Wargrave Local History Society of some of his memories of Life as the Village Chemist, having run the village pharmacy for 29 years.

Fred had qualified as a pharmacist in 1959, and worked for Boots before he was called up for National Service, being posted to work in an RAF hospital. He then worked for a small pharmacy in Reading for a few years, before deciding to take on his own business. On hearing that the chemist's in Wargrave was for sale, he sold his house in order to buy it and moved in - with 2 young children - on 8th September 1969. The shop was located in the High Street, just south of the crossroads. The road then was for 2-way traffic, and there were no traffic lights at the junction. It was a busy road, including car transporters to and from the factory at Oxford, and so the arrival of their removal van outside the shop was not at all popular! Lorries driving through the village would frequently mount the pavement, and when his chemist's sign disappeared, Fred would go and tell the driver to pay for it. There was a variety of shops in the High Street at the time, with a couple of small supermarkets, butchers, fishmongers, newsagents, general store, estate agents, post office (which also sold clothes) etc, and on Saturdays it became a busy centre of village life. The doctor's surgery was around the corner, in Church Street, at Dr Black's house - where the waiting room was small, and filled quickly, so the 'overflow' would wait in their cars in the car park!



Fred's shop, at Ardreddie, in the High Street, was on three floors, and on exploring the upper floor he found a large box marked 'fire escape', which contained a long rope with a hook on one end - fortunately, it never had to be put to use! The business was unlike any he had worked in before, being an old village pharmacy which still had the original type of fixtures inside - mahogany drawers all down one side. These had the old drug names on them - in theory in alphabetical order, and the shop was full of the traditional bottles of chemicals. In those days, most prescriptions were made up by the pharmacist on site, unlike today, when medicines come pre-packed - and are more expensive.

The chemist's business is thought to have been started before WW1 by Guilhermia Smith, daughter of Charles Watson, a former village doctor (who had lived next door at Ash Tree House) - the premises having previously been the surgery waiting room. Apart from medicines, the shop sold 'expensive soaps' such as Yardley and Bronnley, that were popular at the time.

Shortly after Fred took over the shop, the development that became Bayliss Road was taking place. It was suggested that the surface water from that area could be fed into the stream which runs from Bowsey Woods to Mill Green, and so a man from Wokingham District Council called at the shop - he needed to check the stream where it ran below the shop. To do this he had to crawl through the pipe under the building - and on emerging into the garden declared that it was 'alright', and he had only seen a few rats!

The change to decimal coinage came in 1971, which created a few problems. Not only did new tills have to be provided, but there was also a change from measurements such as grains and scruples to milligrammes. Further problems came with the miner's strike, when trying to run a shop in the dark, lit

only by candles and torches. After a while, Fred modernised the shop, selling the old fashioned fittings to a collector who was keen on the set of pharmacist's drawers.

In those days, most customers paid by cheque or cash. There were no cheque cards then, so customers were asked to put their name and address on the back of the cheque. One lady asked "why?" - it transpired that her address was on the front of the cheque, as she lived over the bank, and it is thought her family owned the bank anyway! Fred knew his customers, and some would be allowed to have goods 'on tick'. One lady wanted some Polaroid sunglasses, and would pay the next day. She never did - even when Fred sent the 'debt collector' round (ie his wife!) to the house. Another customer had parked a large Austin Westminster car outside the shop whilst she made her purchases. On turning round, she asked "Where's my car?" - it had run away down the slope to the crossroads!

In 1972, Dr Black appeared at the shop with a new young doctor, Dr Swan. She had a great talent - she could write beautifully! At that time, all prescriptions were hand written, and some customers thought they could alter them. On more than one occasion, Fred became suspicious, and so discreetly called the doctor, and then the police, whilst keeping the customer in the shop, until the police arrived.

Other customers included Robert Morley, Mary Hopkin, and Dave Allen - who was always looking for 'situations' for his comedy programmes. When he heard that Fred's daughter was working in the shop, Dave Allen accused him of using 'slave labour'!

The adjoining shop had been run by Alf Ladd, and later the La Ronde's, as a general store, before becoming John Connell's first antique shop in the village. By the late 1970s, both Fred and John became aware of a problem on the roof, with damp in one of the bedrooms. On returning from a visit onto the flat roof from above John's premises, they found 2 customers in the antique shop, and a 'big chap with a bulge in his jacket' outside. A short while after, John called to ask Fred if he knew who the lady customer was - Princess Margaret had apparently been to buy some silver antiques.



The pattern of trade changed, so the shop was closed on Saturday, instead of Wednesday, afternoons. The suppliers became more competitive, and Fred joined a co-operative called Unichem, and orders could be sent to them by coupling a device over the phone handset. When the second phase of Elizabeth Court was planned, it was decided to move the surgery there, also allowing for Dr Black's retirement. As the chemist's shop was still in the High Street, they lost around 25% of their business, and so it was imperative that the pharmacy move to Victoria Road. Fred heard that Botting's shop might be

on the market, and after some years of negotiation, the purchase was completed. Much building work was needed to make the shop fit for its new use, and when the firm went bankrupt, local builder Clifford Maidment stepped in to finish the work. The new shop was to open on November 14th 1983 - but the shop fittings had not arrived, so after some 'threatening phone calls' they were brought from Germany and installed over that weekend. Most of the stock was in boxes, but the sheer volume of it - some of the 'poisonous substances' had been there 70 years - Fred had 'seriously underestimated'. But the shop managed to open on the Monday, even if much stock remained on the floor. The move was a success, and expansion of the premises followed, Fred remaining the village chemist until he retired in 1998.

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The next meeting will be on Tuesday February 11th, Patsy Roynon's subject will be the History of Loddon Drive. This will be followed, on Tuesday, March 11th, by the Society's Annual General Meeting when the programme of meetings for the coming year will be announced.