

Wargrave Local History Society

Latest News - February 2021

Smelly Alley, Reading - Kevin Little

The February meeting of Wargrave Local History Society was held on-line using Zoom. Kevin Little, formerly the proprietor of Frost's - the fishmonger in Reading's Union Street – gave a very entertaining and informative presentation on “Smelly Alley and other items of interest about Reading”.



Many people, Kevin said, thought that Union Street was also called Smelly Alley because of the fish and meat shops there, but an old map showed that the name pre-dated any of those. He had been shown a 16th century map that marked an open sewer where Union Street is now, with a narrow pathway alongside, labelled Smelly Alley. It was the only way from Broad Street to Friar Street between Market Place and West Street at that time - the name Union Street only came into use in the 18th century.

Kevin regaled his audience with many stories of traders and their ‘tricks of the trade’. The habit of many of the shopkeepers was to display their wares on the street in front of their premises. The local police considered this to be illegal, obstructing the narrow thoroughfare, and so would send the biggest, tallest, constable down to check. If his helmet touched one of the shop blinds he would push it up, whilst if there was any produce in his path he would throw it away. By this time, both Queen Victoria Street and Cross Street were also patrolled by the police, and so a message would be sent ahead from one to another to warn of the approaching patrol, so the way could be cleared until he had passed.

When fishmongers started trading in Union Street, there was no refrigeration, and the fish was displayed on marble slabs at the front of the shop, and there would be sawdust on the floor. The fish would be transported in wooden boxes, with some ice thrown in around them, by train. There was a special fish dock at the station, from where the boxes had to be collected - hopefully without too much delay.



Kevin's father had worked for a fishmonger in Guildford - a large shop employing 18 staff. It had been acquired by a national chain of fish merchants, MacFisheries. They had lots of shops, were 'light years ahead' of the competition, having been to America to learn about refrigeration, ice making machines and so on, and were large enough to operate their own fleet of boats, so had more control over the type and quality of fish on offer. One of their managers appeared one day, and said he thought they had a good display of fish, but why not try putting the white fish at the back, and the coloured fish at the front to attract customers. He tried that - and then a different manager called, and said he thought they had a good display of fish, but it looks a bit garish, so try putting the coloured fish at the back, and the white at the front - so he reverted to the earlier plan. When the first manager returned a short while later, he said "you haven't done what I asked"! Mr Little decided he could not work for MacFisheries, and so left. He heard about a vacancy for a fishmonger at Slough, and so moved to work there for 2 years.



Whilst working there, he discovered that a shop nearby was having work done on it - for MacFisheries, who made an 'opening offer' to attract customers - butter at 3/6d per pound. The existing shop then put up a sign for butter at 3/3d a pound - and each then undercut the other until the price dropped to 9d. MacFisheries manager was concerned, as this would cost them a lot of money. "I know" was the reply. It was suggested that if the existing shop returned the price to 3/6d that day, the two businesses could thereafter agree on pricing. "Not today", was the reply, "as the Press are coming tomorrow". "But its costing us a lot of money", said the MacFisheries man. However, the existing fishmonger said that "It does not affect me as much as it does you" - "Why?" - "We don't sell butter" was his reply!!

A greengrocer who occupied a shop alongside Kevin's in 'Smelly Alley' was the subject of another anecdote. One Christmas Eve, he had a large supply of avocados for sale, at 12 for £1. They looked good, so Kevin was going to buy some, but the said "don't have those - they're black inside - they've been in the fridge". He had bought them in for a nominal sum, but reckoned he could make a good profit, as people would either forget they had them over the holiday period, and had gone off in that time. Kevin told him "It's wrong" - "I know, but it will make money" came the reply. After Christmas, just one customer came back to complain and demand his money back - Kevin observing that "it was a strange way to do business"



Kevin, outside his fishmonger's shop

A sharp practice concerning a well-known supermarket chain who were expanding at the time concerned the oldest shop in Reading at that time – a greengrocer run by a formidable lady called Kate Coxhead. The supermarket, who already had shops in Reading, was expanding at the time, and the owner tried to persuade Kate to sell her business. She would not sell, but after her death, her family did. The new owners continued to sell fruit and vegetables there for a while, but then a large number of Acrow props appeared inside. Kevin asked his father what was going on – so they went to visit. Whilst his father talked to the manager, Kevin used chalk to mark where each prop was placed. A week or so they went back, and whilst the manager was engaged in conversation, Kevin looked to see if any of the props had moved --- they had. It was a listed timber framed building, but the ploy was to jack it apart, to then claim it was unsafe, and so needed to be demolished – which is exactly what happened to be replaced by “something hideous”.



Coxhead's greengrocery shop



A red herring

Next came red herrings – something every fishmonger sold. They were salted for 6 – 8 weeks, and then smoked for 5 weeks, so would ‘keep for ever’. If brought out into a room, they had an overpowering – but pleasant – smell, and were popular for free snacks in pubs. As they were strongly salted, they were ‘just what the publican wanted’, as people would then want to drink lots of beer to cope with the dry mouth feeling. The strong fragrance had another use – in the open, humans might not detect it, but animals would. If the hunt was taking place, people would take one of these fish out, which the hounds would smell, and then follow. The head of the hunt would then warn fellow horsemen “don’t follow the false trail – it’s a red herring”.

One problem at that time was caused by boys would throw stink bombs into the shop. It so happened that one of the people working there was a prize fighter named George - one who would take on all comers. He saw one of these boys in the act., chased after and caught him. The boy was told to go home, tell his father to cut his pocket money in half - as that had given enabled him to buy the stink bombs - and then dunked the boy into a tub of offal. The boy - in a terrible state - staggered away. It was not long before the father arrived to complain, and that he would go to the police. It was explained to him that it was the father’s fault for giving the boy too much pocket money, buying stink bombs to ruin their trade ---- and if he wasn’t careful, his head would be dunked into the tub as well. Nothing further was heard!

There were numerous stories of encounters with the officialdom – such as a health inspector who was checking on the first aid provision. An incident had been reported in the national media that a man who had died in Scotland might have survived if a ‘proper first aid kit had been available, Kevin told the inspector that he knew where the Royal Berkshire Hospital was, and could take someone needing treatment there on his sack truck if necessary. The inspector checked the first aid box, but objected to the contents. There were some aspirins inside (which were the treatment most often needed if one of the staff had been ‘out on the town’ the previous night). To satisfy the inspector, Kevin went to the local chemist, bought a new first aid box, and sealed it, with a label “do not use – for health inspector only”. On the latter’s next visit, he was not satisfied – picked up an eye patch and wondered what could be done with it. “How many staff have you here?” “4” – “Then you must have 4 eye patches”. The inspector did not appreciate the reply – “As each member of staff has 2 eyes, don’t you mean 8?”

On another occasion, an inspector called and asked about the goose eggs on sale. “Are they from a registered farm?” - “There is no such thing for goose eggs”. The inspector said they were not happy, and would not look into it. He agreed that there had not been a complaint - there had not been one against them in 50 years (unlike a certain supermarket, where there were complaints every week). They had sold loads of goose eggs for a long time, and they would earn him about £4000 a year. The inspector explained the rules - they could be sold outside a farm, or at a fete up to 14 miles from the farm, or at a market without a roof up to 60 miles away, but only 14 miles from the farm if it was a covered market. He could travel from the Shetland Isles to the Scilly Isles selling them door to door - but if he were to telephone the customer and tell them he was coming, that would be breaking the law. The rules seemed ridiculous - and it was pointed out to the inspector that Fortnum and Mason, in Piccadilly, sold them, so there “must be a goose farm within 14 miles of there”. There isn’t.

One of the other fishmongers in Reading, Eighteens, would put an iced swan - an expensive item to buy - in the window every Friday, as a way to attract customers, on which would be laid the best fish. The owner of the business did not work there, but passing by one Friday noticed some old yellow frozen Canadian salmon on the iced swan. On asking the staff who had done that, he was told there was nothing else to put there. The owner picked up the salmon, hurled it at the member of staff responsible, knocking him unconscious. He was revived with some smelling salts brought from Timothy Whites (chemist) - and declared that he never wanted to work in a fish shop again. Kevin wondered ‘what would happen today’.



Unusual specimens of fish sale could cause difficulty. The owner of a trout farm at Hungerford offered Kevin some pike, which had been caught as otherwise were predators on the trout. They were put on display at the front of the shop, where mackerel might otherwise be, with a notice warning not to touch - pike having sharp teeth. It was not long before the police arrived in several cars, with horns going, the officers wearing bullet proof vests. They considered the pike to be ‘wild dangerous animals’ – but Kevin pointed out to them that they ‘had no legs, so they weren’t going anywhere’ The police threatened to prosecute him unless they were moved immediately. Kevin mused that he wondered if he would get as rapid a response if he contacted them to say he suspected a neighbour’s house was being burgled.

Getting a quick reaction was needed when building work at his shop exposed a previously unknown high voltage electric meter. He contacted the electric company, who said they could deal with it in 3 weeks time. He asked the name of the person who said that – and said he would put that on the meter, which was exposed to rain, and at child height, so that if anything untoward happened, they would know who had made the decision not to act quickly. The response was that the electric engineers arrived in 3 minutes!

Kevin had many, many other tales to tell – including, the water company who declared the deep sewer (the enclosed one from which Smelly Alley got its name) was not their responsibility as it belonged to the various shop owners - even though the water company had been charging for its use for decades, or detecting the early stages of a furniture stop in Friar Street, to running a disco (playing music he did not like or understand) at the Tudor Tavern, close by.



Fire at the furniture store, with the Tudor Tavern next door.

With a light, gentle and entertaining style, the audience were left with smiles on their faces after so many ‘fishy tales’.
