

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - April 2007

### Victorian Shopping

Tony King began by explaining that - as a chartered surveyor - he was interested in how shops had been transformed over the years. The roots of that change were in the Victorian period of 1837 - 1901, at the height of the British Empire, which covered 1/6 of the world's surface.

Those who were willing to take the risk, could take advantage of the opportunities this gave. Consumerism was effectively born in 1851, when 'going shopping' came of age with the Great Exhibition - where, for the first time, people could browse the goods on offer without actually having to buy them. The building itself was of interest. The designer, Joseph Paxton, was bored in a committee meeting, and doodled a design that was put up in under 12 months in Hyde Park. The crowds came - so many that queues stretched back into central London - and inside found displayed everything that was available from across the Empire.

Until this time, shop windows were made of glass panes about 12" x 16", but gradually plate glass became available. Shop windows were first made using several (typically 3) panes across, but eventually a single pane over the whole window made it easier for the goods to be displayed. The introduction of gas - and later electric - lighting brightened the window displays.

Another change that influenced shopping habits was the greater ease with which people could get around - with the railways - including London's pioneering underground system - horse drawn buses and trams etc. Thomas Cook - a Baptist Sunday school teacher from Leicester, began excursions - at first locally, and then to the Great Exhibition - and eventually across the Empire.

At the start of the Victorian era there were many small local shops, like the village post office and savings bank, farmer's markets (now seeing a resurgence) etc, many 'specialist' in a specific product. The sight of open knives, open meat and children all together in the butcher's would not fit in with today's health and safety rules, but people survived!

Tony showed us how many now well known names on the High Street had developed from small beginnings, maybe as a market stall or a small local shop. Henry Tate had a typical small store in Birkenhead, as tea dealer and general grocer, and set up a sugar refinery in Liverpool - from which today's Tate & Lyle grew. Arthur Brooke had shops in Liverpool, Leeds and Bradford where he sold Brooke Bond tea (adding the Bond as it 'sounded right') - expanding later to London, Lea and Perrins developed their famous sauce from a horrid Indian recipe, whilst Alfred Bird, who had a small Birmingham shop selling toiletries developed a custard powder without eggs, which he exported worldwide.

Many of these Victorian's soon saw the power of advertising, and Tony showed many typical examples of the period - some with rather dubious claims for the product. Many of them looked after their workforce too - Coleman (of mustard fame) educating the workers some 20 years before the 1864 Education Act, Lever (of Sunlight soap) providing recreation facilities for the staff, and Cadbury's providing their workers with housing.

London shops were still specialists, such as Maples or Hewetsons furnishing stores in Tottenham Court Road or William Carter's in Holborn - sellers of the 'self adjusting corset at 12/6d! Ladies would visit Swan & Edgar, Harvey Nichols or Peter Robinsons for the 'fashion' of the day.

Other well known shops of today, like Marks and Spencer, began as market stalls, or Boots the chemist - founded by Jesse Boot (a farm labourer's son) in Nottingham in 1877. William Debenham and Thomas

Clark built their business on mourning garments, whilst John and Mary Sainsbury began in 1869 selling butter milk and eggs from a small shop in Drury Lane. When in 1950 the firm opened a self service store, people said Sainsbury's would go bankrupt, as 'no one would go round a shop with a basket'!! The first 'department store' was the Bon Marche in Brixton, opened in 1877, whilst Harrods began as a small grocery shop catering for visitors to the 1851 Great Exhibition , expanding along the road to occupy the site it has today.

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