



Work

Shopkeepers

Before the expansion of multinational companies, the needs of local people were served by small shops and traders.

On this page, notes and extracts from 'Shops Book - Shopkeepers and Street Traders in East Brighton 1900-1930' by Neil Griffiths are explored to give a varied account of the community of shopkeepers and traders in Brighton and Hove. From the hierarchy of the professional shop owner down to The barrow boys everyone stayed busy selling what the customer wanted to buy.

General Information

The 1875 directory for East Brighton listed 35 bootmakers, 3 breweries, 19 dress-makers, 15 tailors, 2 watchmakers, 2 tanners, 2 brushmakers and 2 basketmakers. By 1974 they had virtually all disappeared, apart from one jeweller and one costumer.

There has been a decline in the number of small shops in general, and a growth in the size of large multiples such as Allied Suppliers, associated British Foods Ltd. (£524 million profit in 1970), Great Universal Stores Ltd. (£425 million profit in 1970) and Marks and Spencers (£416 million profit in 1970).

The Professional Shopkeeper was distinctly better off than the rest. He was usually an employer, and had learnt the skills of his trade as an apprentice and manager. He often belonged to trade professional associations such as the Brighton and Hove Butchers Association.

The Small Shopkeeper was less well off than the professional, had a lower status in the neighbourhood and depended solely upon his family to staff his shop. These ventures were often very risky because they were based on small amounts of borrowed capital and little or no experience in trading.

Street Sellers, included barrow boys, costermongers and street traders, who were itinerants, without capital, a fixed shop or regular customers. Their trade was risky but, at times, very lucrative.

Women Proprietors

The directories reveal that women proprietors were common - especially in laundries, greengroceries, confectioneries and various other dealerships.

Credit

Credit-giving involved great risk for the shop-keeper. His fortunes and livelihood were bound up with those of his customers and the whole neighbourhood. Hard times hit him as much as anyone else. The death of a debtor or the laying off of the breadwinner was calamitous for the poorer shopkeepers.

20th Century Sparks!

Work

Shopkeepers - continued

All Shops had long hours due to competition. Before the shop even opened in the morning, the green-grocer had to buy and transport his produce from the market, which opened at 4:00 a.m. At 5:30, the baker had to start making the day's bread; the coal merchant had to weigh and load up at the station at 4:00 a.m. The shops then opened at 8:00 and closed when people stopped coming- usually at 8:30 in the evening on a weekday, but frequently as late as midnight on Saturdays.

Social Function

Many shop-keepers recall customers stopping to gossip about family and neighbours: some customers came in to talk even when no purchases were made. The bakery ovens were used by women to cook their own food and bake their bread, and the chemist was expected to advise on health and medicines, and even to administer treatment.

Thus the shop functioned as a citizen's advice bureau, gossip exchange, information centre and betting office. Some shopkeepers were also money lenders. Distrust of doctors, as well as inability to afford their fees, encouraged many to go to the chemist for advice and home remedies: it was a form of community health centre.



Market in Oxford Street off London Road
Shops Book, Brighton 1900-1930

20th Century Sparks!

Work

The Barrow Boys

What did the shopkeepers think of the barrow boys?

Mrs. Wheatley: "Street traders would be all over the place; some would be down where the mackerel came in, some would carry soft fruit. Well, it was bad for the shopkeeper. If they came through Richmond Buildings with a barrow, they're selling stuff 2d. or 3d. a pound cheaper than the shops are, naturally that's going to hit the shop, isn't it?"

Lil Harriet: (shopkeeper, Sussex Street, early 1930's): "My husband went down to the market to buy, then we'd bring it up home and we'd sell. You'd have to dress that shop Friday for Saturday trade. But that same article the barrow boys would have on Saturday afternoon for half the price. Some, they'd sell up in Upper Gardner Street. It was all wrong."



Milk street vendor
Shops Books Brighton 1900-1930

Miss Bristow of Elm Grove saw less conflict in the situation and felt there was a common sympathetic understanding between the two sets of traders: "There used to be a lot of them, but there was a kind of sympathetic feeling that a barrow boy wouldn't stand outside a shop selling the same stuff. Like a fish barrow wouldn't stand outside a fish shop... It was a genuine kindness and friendship between traders. Didn't want to take each other's trade away. I often think it was very wrong. So much was said about it - having the barrow on the street - it's why they first started the Open Market. Well, that got out of proportion - different big firms got stalls there. It wasn't intended for that to begin with. It was intended for the men on the street. The stuff they brought down the market was stuff the shopkeepers had rejected."

Fred Howell: They had their barrow and that's all they paid for -with the shopkeeper he had his overheads and men working for him. That's what upset them. But that's nothing to do with us. Shopkeepers always said they bought the rubbish. You see, you couldn't keep stuff over the week-end. There wasn't fridges like there is now. Then you had to sell it or it would go rotten by Monday...

Shop Books Brighton 1900-1930