

Back Then...

Toothill
Farmhouse.
Circa 1978



The Swindon Society Newsletter - April 2025



...And More Recently - January 2025



Welcome to the April Newsletter

Welcome to our April meeting.

I'm excited! Our chairman, Andy Binks, is at the helm tonight with a presentation entitle - Swindon - This is Swindon. Who knows what we are going to see? - But one thing is for sure... it will be interesting! Strap in tight ladies and gentlemen, sounds like we're in for an evening of Swindon pictures all the way!

Without wishing to sound like a broken record, I need to remind you all that we still have vacancies for a couple of committee members. I promise it isn't a difficult job and not very time consuming. A little bit of assistance with admin would be good, but we also need fresh thoughts and ideas, and a bit of help setting up our meetings. As I said before, the committee meets for an hour and a half, roughly monthly so it's not too much of a commitment either.

Our meetings are so friendly and fun and we need to keep our Society going well into the future, as I'm sure you will agree. Let us know if you are interested, or if you want a bit more information.

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Let's Go Shopping

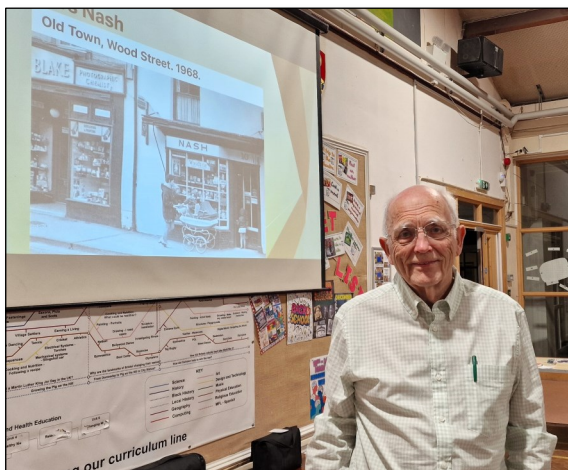
Presented by
John Stooke

12th March 2025

We were treated to a nostalgic review of popular shops in Swindon this month – what a treat! John begun his talk with a reminder that everyone went shopping in the town centre on a Saturday morning. He told us that most people would walk into town or (if they were monied) they would get the tram.

We then saw a photo of one of the first buses that ran to the town centre after the trams stopped in 1929 – a motorised charabanc.

John told us that back in those days you could get everything from the Co-op. We then had a little bit of history on the two different societies which operated in Swindon from the mid-1800s and John showed us a picture of the Co-op on Fleet Street, which was a proper department store with a well-known restaurant - but was located in a stripped-out row of terraced houses. We then saw a photo of a long a queue of people waiting to get their dividends. Then it was another Co-op in Swindon, this time





on Cheney Manor Road (which is now a Tesco Express). John also showed us an electric delivery van which took over from the horse-drawn delivery.

We then moved onto bakeries and John told us about Grays. The first one opened in Bridge Street in 1919 and by 1950 there were seven shops, eight vans and 120 people working shifts across 24 hours a day. Grays was

especially famous for its Lardy Cake. However, all the shops closed leaving just the one in Devizes Road, and that closed in 1976. John showed us a photo of that shop, which was approximately opposite Blaylocks.



Then it was onto Deacons; the main place where Swindonians would buy their jewellery (well, those who could afford it of course!). The first shop was opened in Wood Street by George Deacon in 1848, after he was able to borrow £700 from his father. George's nephew Hubert then joined company and won the timing contract for the Midland & South West Junction Railway and the contract for Hubert also bought land and built Deacon Street as well as opening a shop in Fleet Street and winning the contract for the Town Hall clock. We then saw a photo of the frontage of the Wood Street premises. John also mentioned that there was a jeweller called James Walker next to Woolworths as well as the Cottell Brothers shop, also on Regent Street.



coal and flowers was Day's, whose office was opposite Woolworths on Regent Street. We were then treated to some photos of the inside of Arthur Day's coal office. It was then on to toys and models, which were bought from The Spot in Regent Street and Hobbies Corner in Fleet Street. Although The Spot was listed as a cycle distributor in all its branding, John said they didn't really sell much in the way of bikes and were mostly known for Dinky Toys and Meccano.





We saw two pictures of The Spot in all its glory, one from the 1940s and a later one (following a modernising re-brand) in the 1960s.

We then moved onto fish – and everyone would buy their fish from Mac Fisheries which was just next door to The Spot (and both were opposite Woolworths in Regent Street) and we were shown both external and internal photos of this one. They were

a national chain of fishmongers, unlike Wallis Bros. who were famous in Swindon as a retail fishmonger and wholesaler. The fish for Wallis Bros. came on the train fresh from Grimsby; they had several shops of their own in Swindon including one in Cromwell Street.

Our next retailers were purveyors of furniture and in Swindon that could only mean Normans. However, John enlightened us that it was actually begun by George Wallis – the owner of Wallis Bros.! Normans was simply a new brand to differentiate it from the well-known fishmongers. Normans had a no-quibble guarantee and could be bought on cash or hire purchase, so they were a popular choice for both Swindonians and for the Royal Family (hence they held a Royal Warrant). With few easy options to get rid of old furniture Normans would take old items in part-exchange, but they were then overwhelmed with second-hand items, so established another brand in 1962 to sell it through – Bernards, based in Bridge Street. Normans had a three-storey shop in the Brunel Plaza from its opening in the 1970s until 1994; they then moved down to Bridge Street. Normans eventually closed in 2002 and staff from Normans then started up Manor Furniture. Whilst John was telling us about this history, we were shown photos of the Normans shop in Cromwell Street and then the interior of Bernards. We also saw a map of the Brunel Plaza showing the many retailers such as Boots, Sainsburys and Normans, and then interior and exterior photos of the latter. Then it was a photo of the Bridge Street premises with Stead & Simpson on the opposite corner. A real slice of nostalgia in those photos.



Another popular furniture retailer in Swindon was Gilberts in Old Town. William Gilbert was originally a cabinetmaker from Marlborough and set up his first shop on Belle Vue Road near to the old Swindon Advertiser office.



In 1875 he bought the house and shop in Newport Street that we are all familiar with now, and his son John took over the business in 1900. John Gilbert convinced Swindon Corporation Tramways to name the last stop on the line in Old Town “Gilberts Furnishings”, even though it wasn’t necessarily that close to the stop! John then showed us an engraving of a Gilbert advert. Finally, we had Spillers, which began life down in Bridge Street and then moved up to Bath Terrace (where we would now find Blaylocks) and we were shown an engraving of this shop in an advert from 1844-5. They then moved to Victoria Road where they stayed until they closed in 2003.

We then moved speedily through other retailers, including Kane’s for bikes and a number of other national retailers such as Liptons and B&Q and



then we got to Limmex, which was opened by Samuel Limmex. Welding and soldering could be carried out in store here, which made it different to other ironmongers in town. The last owner of the shop before it closed in 2000 was Roy Stevens. Other ironmongers included J. Lott & Sons on Temple Street and Keogh’s which was on Bridge Street. Burtons was also mentioned for suits, as well as GW Clothiers and

Morse’s. We then had some photos of Mcllroys, because we couldn’t have a talk about shops in Swindon without mentioning this long-lamented stalwart of the town centre. We had several photos of the interior including the famous staircase too.



We then concluded with a few retailing anomalies beginning with a photo and brief reminder about the “shop that time forgot” – Brain’s on Manchester Road. Edna Brain shut up shop in the 1970s when her husband died and it then stayed exactly as it was for the next 30 or so years, until she died in 2003. Finally, a photo of the Fleet Street Market, which was also popular with town centre shoppers in the 1980s and 90s, having been established by Dougie Grant – he bought the Co-op and Sir Daniel’s Arms buildings and knocked them down for this exact purpose!



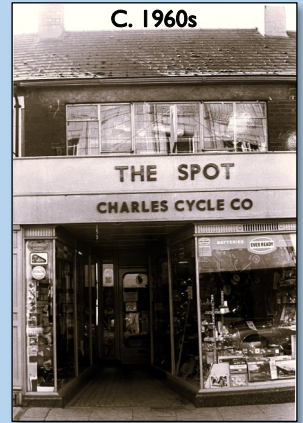
Many thanks to John for this nostalgic look at shopping in Swindon.

Kelly Blake - March 2025

Working Saturdays at The Spot

At the age of 15 I got a Saturday job at The Spot earning £1 a week.

The Spot was a well-known institution in Regent Street. Opposite to Woolworths it sold a variety of things, sports goods, toys, fishing equipment and models. It's now the Cornish Bakehouse and it's roughly opposite where Barclays Bank is today. The official name of the shop and the company which ran it was The Charles Cycle Company. They had originally sold cycles and small mopeds and had a main shop in Salisbury. By the 60s the shop had become The Spot and the one thing it did not sell was cycles!



It was a long narrow shop entered by a door set back from the street to accommodate the shop windows on either side of the entrance. On the right hand side were the counters, on the left a slightly raised area where footwear could be tried on, and further down the shop large toys were displayed. Between the two was a wooden floor which was oiled yearly. The first part of the shop was devoted to sports, then a small counter for fishing equipment. The rest of the downstairs was all toys. At the end of the shop were stairs which led up to a large model section. Airfix models were all the rage in those days.

At the back of the shop there was a small area where staff could have a break as well as a space where boxes could be stacked by the back door. This led out onto a small car parking area which would now be part of the old McIlroys car park. In the area between the fishing and toys sections at the back of the counter was a set of stairs which led to a large upstairs store room.

I was put to work mainly on the sports section and, as it was attached, the fishing section as well. I very rarely ventured into the toys or upstairs to models. The manager, Jock Leitch, was a large middle-aged man; he was pleasant enough but I rarely saw him. The under-manager was called Cecil. My immediate colleague was Godfrey. In the toy section were Iris and Madge and, finally, upstairs was Dave who I very rarely saw.

The till was a great beast of a thing which shot open when you pressed the button. If you remember Ronnie Barker's Arkwright's till in 'Open All Hours' you're on the right lines. We had not yet reached the age of decimalisation and there were no calculators so everything had to be added up, either in your head or on a scrap of paper.

It was often quite boring as sometimes there were no customers for long periods of time, nevertheless you couldn't sit down, you had to look alert and ready in case anyone did come in. I soon learned it was much better to be busy and then time went by very quickly. Few customers meant a very long day indeed. The Christmas period was especially busy and there were occasions when the whole shop was packed with customers buying presents, toys, sports goods, models and so on.

Godfrey's surname was Hargreaves. He was a good guy to work with and we got on well. His great passion was fishing and he had persuaded the management to devote part of the sports counter to fishing. It was a good idea as lots of his fishing mates

came in for supplies and equipment. I knew nothing whatsoever about fishing but I was a quick learner as regards to the theory. Before long I could talk knowledgeably about the size of the hook and the breaking strain of the line. I waxed lyrical about the relative values of certain types of reel, or the advisability of one type of rod over another. Don't get me started on bait!

I once tried fishing at Godfrey's suggestion. He kitted me out with some basic equipment and I duly set off for Coate Water. I caught one fish. Unhooking it from the line was unpleasant (who knew fish were slimy!), I packed up went home and never did it again. I did however continue to be a passionate advocate of the sport from behind the counter!

The fishing counter was very successful, I can still remember Godfrey's triumph in taking £100 one Saturday (a lot of money in the 60s). There was a downside of course and it came in the form of maggots! We had regular orders of these. They came in metal containers about 18 inches square (old commercial biscuit tins I think). When you opened the lid there they all were, squirming away covered in a light layer of sawdust. They were kept at the back of the shop and sold, believe or not, in pints. When a customer asked for them we would go out the back and dip the pint measuring jug into the heaving mass, measure out the requisite amount and pour them into a stout paper bag, or a receptacle provided by the customer.

One day in the summer holidays a whole box got spilled as they were being taken into the shop. Naturally we were straight there with brushes and managed to get most of them back where they belonged. The operative word here is most! A few days later, fueled by the summer heat we opened the shop to find the place swarming with large black blowflies.

Working on Saturdays meant that I was unable to see many Swindon Town games unless they were played on a Tuesday night. There was no internet or even local radio in those days so we had to wait until after 5 to get the result. My job on Saturday was to go up to the ABC cinema (now the Savoy pub at the top of town) and get the Football Pink. This was produced by the Evening Advertiser (now Swindon Advertiser) and there, printed on pink paper was everything you needed to know.

I began work at 15 in 1966, in 1969 I went off to teacher training college. I returned each holiday to help out and continued doing so until about 1973. During that time changes were happening socially, and also in sport. One of my first tasks when I started was to learn how to lace a football. We supplied spare bladders and would put them into a leather casing and then lace it up very carefully making sure the laces were flat and didn't stand out. I remember starting to sell the newer balls where there was no lace, as is standard today. Old leather studded football boots gave way to boots with replaceable plastic or metal studs. Football kit began to change. I can remember the confusion when Manchester United (not ManU!) changed their socks from red with one black stripe to two black stripes - the football kit business was just starting to gear up.

We began selling 'trainers' as opposed to canvas sports shoes (the legendary 'Dunlop Green Flash'). Then there was the Fred Perry tennis shirt. In addition to the standard white we started to stock them in a variety of colours, such as black or lilac. All of a sudden young men couldn't get enough of them. They had become a fashion item with 'mods' and were constantly in demand.

I suspect there were many more but looking back these were examples of the way in which our society was gradually embracing a new kind of consumerism. Sports clothes were no longer for sport, they were 'leisure wear'. And look where we are today! But when I began the world of the 60s in Swindon was still rooted in a past we can dimly imagine today. Sometimes we received a visit from the owner, Mr Charles, accompanied by his son 'Young Mr Charles'. Charles senior must have been in his late 50s or early 60s and the younger in his early thirties. They were 'old school' and addressed me as 'Norman' and we all had to be deferential to them.

Next door to the shop was Mac Fisheries, a nationwide chain of fish shops. At around 5pm each day they began to tidy up for the day and would hose down the pavement in front of their shop. There would be a smell of wet fish lingering around if you popped your head outside.

Further on down from them was Radio Rentals, where black and white sets would show 'Grandstand' on a Saturday afternoon. The other way, up towards the Town Hall was 'International Stores' a kind of small mini supermarket. Godfrey's girlfriend, later wife, worked there and he would often sneak out to see her. Across the road was Woolworth's - then in its heyday. My then girlfriend worked there for a while on the deli counter and I too would sneak out to say hello.

Over the years we had other Saturday workers, Tony, who went on to work in Terry Warners Sports on Commercial Road, Roy, a tall youth who went on to become a fireman, and Pete, who I became friendly with as we both came from Old Town and shared similar interests.

And of course eventually it all came to an end. I became a teacher. Godfrey left some time in the late 60s and set up his own shop, 'The House of Angling' down the bottom of Commercial Road opposite the covered market. He was immensely successful. He was a well respected figure in the world of angling and wrote a weekly angling column in the Adver for many years. He died relatively young though some years ago.

Roy did become a fireman and I came across him at a funeral a few years ago and we exchanged a few brief nostalgic words. I lost track of Pete somewhere along the way.

Some time in the 80s The Spot closed and became a pasty shop which it still is today - No 60 Regent Street.

Some while ago I was talking to Chris Hext, who ran Froud & Hext and later Spot-On models at the bottom of town. I told him about my days in The Spot and mentioned Dave, who had sold the models upstairs. In turned out that Dave had worked for him for many years and had recently retired.

Ray Norman - April 2025



Foreword: *Christine Senior's mother, Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt), sadly passed away in June 2024. Fortunately, she left behind a wonderful legacy of documented childhood memories which Christine has kindly allowed us to reproduce in our newsletter. As Muriel wrote such detailed memories of her life, it is being published in instalments over a few newsletters. I found her stories fascinating, and I hope that you do too.*

My Childhood Memories (Part Four)

When I was nearly 13, the Second World War broke out. My father came home a few days later wearing a policeman's uniform. He became a wartime policeman. He enjoyed the freedom but mum never liked the shift work he did. During the First World War, dad had put his age on and joined up at the age of 16 and went into the RAMC. He saw so many terrible things that when war came again, he wanted to stay in Swindon and of course had a family, so he volunteered for the police. The following week we moved to Whitworth Road. Mum and Dad had bought a bungalow with a large garden. It was like moving to the country as there were fields all around us. Dad had a friend who let him have some Rhode Island Red chickens and we did very well for eggs especially as they soon went on ration. I had to leave my school in the town centre and started at Pinehurst Seniors. The bungalow cost £500 - it was advertised for £150,000 a few years ago (it had been extended) and is probably around £200,000 now.

The girl who lived next door took me to school and put me in the wrong class. The staff were busy with evacuees from London. My first class was an art class and the teacher called the register, when he had finished he asked if anyone hadn't been called to put their hand up and so I did. He asked my name and then asked if my dad was Fred Proffitt as they had been at Euclid Street school together.

My new school was a modern, mixed school with a different room for each subject. We had a cookery class and the teacher gave me the daily job of making the custard for the headmaster's dinner irrespective of what I should have been doing!



Right from birth we belonged to a church. The Railway Mission as a toddler, then Faringdon Road Methodist Church (which became the Railway Museum and is now The Platform). Our Sunday School teacher asked us to start fund-raising for the missionaries so I began by collecting half a penny every week from the other children in the class. My dad suggested that I could stand outside the factory

gate early morning (7.45 am) with a poster, collecting for Daisy Day (National Children's Home). Then I went to school and collected from the teachers. This was the start of my fund-raising career! We also belonged to the Brownies and then Guides. I didn't continue in the Guides when we moved to Whitworth Road. We attended the Methodist church in Cheney Manor Road and at 14 I became a Sunday School teacher and taught in a little room at the back of church. Eve was in the choir. Mum also did a lot of cleaning there.



I made a friend, Doreen Farmiloe who lived near to me. As I did not want to stay on at school, I left school at 14 as did Doreen and as we wanted to stay together we went to work at Wills cigarette factory, stripping tobacco. We never had a careers officer come to the school to suggest other paths to follow. The fact that Wills paid a good wage was an attraction. They also had sports clubs and we joined the cricket and hockey teams, playing in the second team.

Muriel Baker (nee Proffitt)

As To be continued...

TRIP HOLIDAY MEMORIES



Here's a couple of memories prompted by the January newsletter.

The piece by Muriel Baker, reminded me of my GWR July holiday train journeys down to Cornwall. My father was a crane driver on the overhead crane in the JI shop, the iron foundry. (The overhead crane that transferred 3 tons of molten metal from the furnace to the moulds on the floor. Dad said the shop was as long as the Queen Mary liner).

Dad always got free passes for him, mum and myself for the journey to Looe, and back. The GWR always put on the 3rd class carriages for the employees' trip trains so they were not all that clean and often non corridor, so no toilets (I think some trains stopped at certain points when all those in need discharged themselves from the train to the toilets). After 10 minutes the train would start off again, hoping no one was left behind. Looe was at the end of a branch line, that ran from Liskeard(?) so we all waited for the train to arrive from Looe to take us all to our final destination. We sat on our cases on the station platform, the only lighting a few single bulbs down the length of the platform. We arrived at about perhaps one o'clock in the morning.

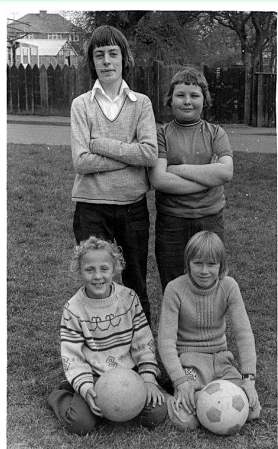
Dad's pay from the GWR was not that good and he wanted to give the family a holiday each year, but was always keen to get value for his free passes; so he chose a destination as far away as he could from Swindon. As Muriel said at first unpaid, so they relied on the weekly bonus he was paid each week, Dad called it his balance.

Dad always saved up the council rate money to be paid in late July, this was taken with him as cash to make sure we had a good time, not short of an ice cream or two. I remember climbing those wooden steps that were at the side of the parked trains in the goods yard, no platforms. The entrance was on the right as you emerged from the Rodbourne Lane bridges, on the way to the park and Faringdon Road. The Daltons weekly newspaper listing holiday accommodation was purchased each year and Mum and Dad selected a lodging that did rooms and attendance. Mum purchased the food or took fresh items from our garden with her. The landlady cooked it, beds and table service were provided, but we were expected to be out all day between meals, even if it rained which it often did in those first two weeks in July. However I cannot remember the family having a bad holiday, even if it was wet for a couple of days in the fortnight.

I appreciated what my parents sacrificed to give us those two weeks away each year.

Mervyn Hewlett - March 2025

BEANEY CORNER



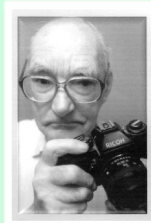
We've finally had a successful identification, Hurray!



In this picture from our February BC, the guy in the white shirt on the left is one of our members - Tim Midwinter. Enjoy your 5 minutes of fame Tim!

Unfortunately, there's only two more this month because it's such a packed newsletter, but they are just as lovely. Let us know if you recognise

anybody... More next month!



Caulfield Road 1950s ↓



Coate Water ↓



Victoria Road 1976



Interior of Liptons - 1945

