

Wokingham Society

'One Hundred Years of Shopping In Reading' by Ann Smith

A presentation at the Annual General Meeting on Wednesday 16 November 2022

Following the Annual General Meeting Ann Smith, former Local Studies Librarian of Reading Central Library and Membership Secretary of the Berkshire Local History Association, presented a fascinating and comprehensive survey of shopping in Reading over a period of one hundred years. Using scores of old photographs of all the major and minor streets in the town centre, she evoked memories of bygone days when the town centre was dominated by individual shops and stores representing a large variety of trades and businesses.

Her virtual tour of the historic shopping area was highlighted by maps from different centuries, including one from 1611, which showed that the main street was the same shape as Broad Street today. Friar Street, King's Road and Queen's Road have been main shopping streets since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and, photographs reveal a throng of people bustling along the busy high streets, often while the traders and owners stand outside posing for photographs or enticing customers into their shops.

Among Victorian businesses mentioned were Cook's Farm and Dairy Shop, which was founded in 1760, Hawkes and Sons Ironmongers and Jacksons, the drapers. Edward Jackson had bought Henry Fox's Outfitting store at 6 High Street in 1848; but in 1875 the store was officially renamed Jacksons. Other shops on High Street were bought by Jackson and finally he acquired a property at the corner of Broad Street and King's Road. The shop was a major feature of the urban landscape until it closed on Christmas Eve, 2013. Generations of customers had bought their children's school uniform in the store, and Jackson's became synonymous with old-fashioned service, and perhaps above all, the Lansom pneumatic tube system for handling cash and payments. Still today its location is known as Jacksons Corner

Jacksons was just one of a number of department stores which started in Victorian Reading, amongst them Wellsteeds which was destroyed by a bomb in 1943. 42 people were killed and there would have been more had it not been a Wednesday, which was traditionally early closing day. William Mcilroy's department store in Oxford Road was known as the Crystal Palace because of its plate-glass windows. Perhaps, most significantly, in 1854 John Heelas, who, as the audience appreciated, already had a shop in Wokingham, opened a small drapery at 33 Minster Street. Heelas set up the new business with his sons, John and Daniel. Over the years they acquired adjacent properties and by 1877 the business had become a department store. Many changes were made over the years and the company was eventually sold to the John Lewis Partnership in 1953 although the original name was kept until 2007. All the department

stores of the period became popular with the more affluent members of the town once they installed flushing lavatories and well-appointed cafes and restaurants. Indeed, the interiors of most large shops were strikingly designed and expensively fitted out. Unsurprisingly many shopkeepers over the years were elected as Mayors or Councillors.

Gradually, however, slum clearances led to the closure of most small family businesses in the town centre, followed in due course by well-known brands like Timothy Whites, Woolworths and Lipton's. Even Huntley and Palmers Biscuit factory, which grew out of a small baker's shop opened in 1822 by Joseph Huntley in London Street, closed in 1972. The evocatively-named Reading Gas Light Company, which had a showroom on the corner of Cross Street and Friar Street, also closed its doors and stopped producing electricity. Debenhams, which closed in 2021, had been a major department store in Reading since the nineteenth century. Finally, Tutty's, a popular furniture and household goods retailers, which opened in 1918 and was one of the first to offer credit terms, closed in 1978 after sixty years of successful trading.

In the course of her talk Ann Smith captured brilliantly the essence of change and growth in a town best known mainly for biscuits, seeds, bricks, the abbey ruins and its notorious jail. It would have been so interesting to have browsed in the London Street Bookshop as well as the largest circulating library in the South of England. It would have been exciting to walk through the narrow streets off the main thoroughfares and even to experience the sights and odours of 'Smelly Alley' when so many sellers of fresh food and hand-made goods sold their wares from the host of small shops competing for trade in the old town centre.

Reading was brought to life by a person dedicated to sharing her research. Many present recognised and knew, if only by name, some of the long-lost shops and businesses named in the presentation and evocatively recorded in scores of vintage photographs. Everybody came away with new and significant impressions of the town stigmatised by Thomas Hardy in 'Jude the Obscure' as Aldbrickham. The presentation was received by the audience with warm and appreciative applause.