

The Market Hall and Market Arcade. Wigan Icons still much lamented.

As the Market Hall struggles against changes in shopping habits, high parking charges not to mention the internet . Its timely to look back to the old Market Hall and Market Arcade in their heyday.

The experience of visiting The Market Hall started as you left The Market place via The Market Arcade , with its uneven Yorkshire Stone Flag floor . Known to all as 'the little arcade' or ' the old arcade', alive with its many stalls and characters - Bob Rudd with his scales, who would shout "try your weight friends " to passers by. Sid Smith's newsagents , Sid and his son Trevor were an institution in Wigan they seemed to know everyone of their customers and had a cheery word for for all. The smell from Gornor's Cafe wafting through the thoroughfare; it was a real treat to dine there ,white tablecloths waitresses in nippy type uniforms. My favourite was steak pudding and chips or it may have been mash, I can't be absolutely certain about the accompaniment but the pudding was better then my Mam's homemade and that's saying something !

In the early 1960s ,Mrs Gormley sold the cafe, that had been her family for well over half a century , to Brenda and Gino Berritta who ran the business until the sad demise of one of Wigan's most loved landmarks. I'm sure if it had been in York or Chester there would have been a preservation order on it . Mr and Mrs Berritta went on to open The Lindley Hotel in Parbold ; they also opened Roberto' s Restaurant off King Street .

Halfway along the walkthrough was Forshaw's Toy Stall and Dolls Hospital , I remember going with my Mam and sister along with her doll 'Dinah', to have its legs reattached , I think it was Mr Forshaw who performed the operation, he had a sort of hook that stretched the thick elastic band inside Dinah and out on the opposite hip , hey presto ! Dinah was complete again . More difficult procedures, eyes , 'Mama' sounds' the doll had to be admitted and collected at a later date . Many a child would be seen making a fuss at having to leave their beloved doll at the causality department. The operations were not always successful, for instance my cousin left her doll with voice and eye problems at one hospital - there was another inside the Market Hall , the eyes were made to blink but the unfortunate doll never uttered ' Mama ' again!

In the arcade there were stalls of every kind - Aly Khan's knitwear , Margaret Razaks stocking bar, Evelyn's 'Catholic Shop' always busy when religious events took place, Confirmations ,First Holy Communions etc. Umpteen other interesting stalls ,including a hardware shop where you could buy anything from a pin to a tin bath. One shop in particular used to sell fireworks leading up to bonfire night, they were displayed in a case with a glass top . One year I wanted to spend my coppers on ' penny bangers ' my Mam thought otherwise , I left with a packet of sparklers and 2 ' Roman Candles ' !

When not being used for fireworks the glass case was used to display cake decorations - Bride and Groom images to go on the top wedding cakes and so forth. I remember clearly my Auntie Maggie buying a fancy ruff type sash to go round the Christmas cake along with a little snowman and robin from this shop . They were used for many years , nothing thrown away that could be used again in those days !

Another strange fact concerning 'Th' Owd Arcade' was the pub at each end 'The Legs of Man' known to all as 'Top Legs' and 'Bottom Legs', it was in fact one pub, it had the same licensee the last one was Mr Rimmer it closed its doors in 1970; it was said it was the longest pub in the country! Another interesting fact Wigan Rugby Club in its short time at Prescott Street 1877 - 1889 the team changed in 'The Bottom Legs' and transported to the ground in a waggon. I imagine bath time would be in a tin bath in front of the fire on arriving home!

Then into Woodcock Street and the sight of our much missed Market Hall, before the entrance there were 2 ice cream vans, Cassinelli's and De Roma's. A tent with a weighing machine but this was only there on Fridays and Saturdays, 2 elderly ladies ran this, Agnes and Margret Ramsdale they lived in the Wallgate area and would bring the entire outfit on a hand cart each Friday, I remember they both always wore a beret, strange the things that stick in your mind.

A man selling shoe laces, outside the market, hail rain or snow, taking cover under the canopy in rain. I recall his refrain "Shoelaces 3 pairs for half a crown black or brown, mix them if you like", he went on to sell counterfeit razor blades probably as 'slip on' shoes became more popular! Talking about the canopies they stood proudly outside the old hall entrances, they were incorporated in the new hall. Whatever happens in the redevelopment of The Market Hall and The Galleries it is to be hoped a way can be found to use them in the new design, it would be heartbreaking to see the rusting away in a scrapyard.

Then the big revolving door, all children would go round at least twice, and a lot more if not stopped. Then the magic of the Hall itself with its cacophony of sounds and different smells emitting from the stalls. The Market Hall always seemed busy, especially on Fridays when the farmers sold their produce on the outside market.

You could buy almost anything, stalls of every description, Lucy's Jewellery, The Pet Shop, Gibson and Young Glass and China Stall, run by Mr and Mrs Worsley who like Sid Smith in the arcade seemed to know everyone. Roy Hurst's record shop, this was a great boost as it brought in younger customers who might never have thought of shopping there. And of course Santus (Uncle Joes) toffee stall. Frank Ryding the newsagent, a great Wigan gentleman who seemed to typify all that is good in local businesses, nothing too much trouble for Frank. Sutcliffe's Tripe Stall. Peacocks had a large stall and a second one across the aisle. The arrival of The Cheese Cabin was a revelation bringing cheeses most Wiganers had never heard of. I'm sure older readers will remember Julia who worked at Barons Butchers she seemed to know everything that was happening in Wigan, you would often hear people say "Ask Julia she'll know!"

I know we can't go back in time but I can't help thinking Wigan might be in a better place if much of the redevelopment hadn't taken place and we still had the nooks and crannies of old.