

# The Wonder of Woolies.

After studying the aerial photograph of Wigan Town Centre in the Observer a few weeks ago I am sure along with many readers I started to go down Memory Lane . Woolworths standing in the middle of the picture guarding the town like a grandmother. It prompted me to look back to its heyday and the void it left when it closed . Thanks to Garry Brunskill for unearthing this gem .

The wonder of Woolworths , so the advert used to go and to umpteen number of of Wigan folk this was exactly what it was - wonderful . Frank Winfield Woolworth was born on April 13th, 1852 in Rodman, New York. He and his brother Charles Sumner Woolworth. were to become founders of a retail dynasty. I doubt if as young entrepreneurs the brothers even knew of the existence of Wigan, a market town 3,318 miles from their birth place or that as their novel retail idea 'Nothing Over 6d' ( two and a half pence £ 2-80p in today's money) would become such an icon of Wigan Town Centre. F W Woolworth opened in Wigan on 20 October 1927 converted from The Royal Hotel and quickly became an integral part of our town . I wonder how many marriages in Wigan came about because of a first date, meeting on Woolworths corner, a favourite meeting point after a first encounter at the Empress Ballroom the previous Saturday.

Incidentally the first store in the UK was opened in Church Street Liverpool on 5th of November 1909 . Wigan was the 187th store , that was a remarkable rate of expansion by any standards. Particularly taking into account the slower communications available. In 1909 telephones were in their infancy , a letter from The USA to The UK would take weeks. The first transatlantic telephone call was on January 7th 1927, almost impossible to comprehend in todays instantaneous world.

To the surprise of many I'm sure , Wigan and District had a second Woolworths , situated at 64 Market Street Hindley this much smaller branch opened on 10th of May 1935 and closed sometime between 1974 -1977 . It was a purpose built store, The building, now a bookmakers, has had an extra floor added above the old flat roof, but retains the distinctive Woolworth parapet wall above the first floor windows which appeared on many of the self-built stores of the Twenties and Thirties.

No visit to Wigan was complete without a visit to ' Woolies ' in my young days the formate was a series of stalls each with its own till, you would get the assistants attention by calling 'Miss' . There were stalls of every kind , so varied it was like a mini Trafford Centre ! An example, hardware - selling everything from Fire Bottoms to ' Blowers ' a metal sheet with a handle used to block the fire opening to create a draught under skilfully laid coal and twisted newspaper, for those unable to get the fire going using this method you could buy a gas poker a contraption that would be placed into the heart of the ensemble until the coal combusted , today this implement would be illegal. For for those with the wherewithal an 'all-night burner ' the ultimate luxury. this was fitted in the opening under the fire and could be used to minimise the draught enabling the fire to remain alight until morning , this was helped by 'raking 'the fire, putting ashes on top of the fire to dampen it; the rake similar to a croupier implement could also be purchased from this 'stall ' Also own brand paint my uncle wouldn't use it he said it was watery and took ages to dry ,this after my Aunty ruined a cardigan on a door painted days before !

The Toffee stall, the second favourite of children, selling all kinds sweets from pear drops to nougat, pronounced by most as 'nuggit' not many knew very much about French pronunciation , I certainly didn't and often choose ' nuggit' as my Saturday treat as it was very ' chewy ' and consequently lasted a long time ! A chocolate bar was a no -no, for me as that would have been consumed before I'd reached the main door. There was great excitement when something new arrived on this stall , a large glass container with a light above , hot cashew nuts had come to Wigan , people queued to sample this new delight ,I remember my Auntie Maggie , after waiting in the queue for what seemed ages buying some and the paper bag within minutes being thick with grease , this same phenomenon occurred with one particular sweet ' Cherry Lips '. I never worked out why this should be ,when other similar sweets such as 'Midget Gems' left the bag pristine. The girls on this stall wore different uniforms to other staff ,white with maid type head bands with a big

red 'W' in the middle ! Using little scoops to fill the various size bags , square - 4oz , three cornered -2oz . From my observations in the 1950s I think they used more of the latter !

The favourite of children of course was The Toy Stall , with every conceivable toy you could imagine , for girls, dolls , toffee shops , cookers with little pots and pans , baking sets with rolling pins etc. The boys side of the counter , Davy Crocket Hats , which had the ability to make the hardest of lads look silly, I never had one as I could achieve that without the need of of hat with a tail swinging at the back ! Back to other boys favourites , cowboys outfits, guns of every description from rifles with corks on strings ,these would be cut at the earliest opportunity , Flash Gordon Ray Guns, Tool Sets with plastic saws and hammers , this demarcation between the sexes would have todays gender neutral brigade in a state of apoplexy, not to mention the nature verses nurture lobby . Whilst I fancied many of the toys, the thing I craved was a spirit level from the Tool Stall, after being fascinated watching a bricklayer working in our street. Mam said they were not for children and the novelty would soon ware off , this I never found out as no amount of persuasion would make her relent . Who knows if Mam had taken me seriously I might have been a wiz at D I Y !

The Tea Bar with a row of fixed stools with red seats that revolved , this was always busy not least with bus drivers and conductors having their morning or afternoon brew. Slices of toast and toasted teacakes seemed the most popular choice. I think sandwiches were also on the Bill of Fare although I can't be sure of that. Horlicks and hot milk were certainly available and I watched in amazement as the lady would go to the back of the bar to a row of silver urns, place a cup of milk under a nozzle, pull the lever down and within seconds the cup was steaming with a loud hissing sound. I used to think I'd like a try, needless to say this along with the spirt level never materialised .

Many readers will remember the big red scales with a massive face near the Standishgate entrance . There was a weight for height scale on this piece of equipment , I can remember my Aunty Maggie using the machine and looking at the table and saying according to that she ought to be 6ft-9ins, Incidentally she was about 5ft-3ins ! It strange that a printed notice could cause so much indignation. My Aunty said that was the last time she'd use them and would go instead to Bob Rudd with his 'far more reliable Jockey Scales ' in ' the little arcade ' . The scales had another use , if you 'got lost ' your Mam would tell you to stand near them . I've seen more than one child standing on the wobbly platform looking anxiously above the counters awaiting rescue !

There were also stalls of every kind Stationary, Ladies , Gents, Make Up and Toiletries . There was on one stall a place where you could test yourself for spectacles , there was a paddle about the size of a table-tennis bat with different size script .This came to an abrupt end with the Opticians Act 1958 giving opticians a monopoly, this was to last until the early 90s when 'Ready Specs ' again be came available on the high street.

A visit Woolworths would be called 'retail therapy' today , it used to be called a shopping spree both the same of course . They have to have new names for everything , passing trade becomes footfall and so-forth, whatever you call it Wigan Town Centre has never been quite the same since Woolies closed its doors for the last time ; on that day a little bit of Wigan's heart was lost too !