

# Marks & Spencer.

## Goodbye to St. Michael and all that !

As we approach the end of trading of M&S in Wigan town centre it is a timely to look at the company's long connection with our town . I am aware of the sadness felt by everyone about the closure I hope this potted history will be of interest .

Wigan played no little part in the expansion of the company .The story however begins in Slonim in the Russian partition of Poland . Michael Marks left his home age 19 and came to London to start a new life. He soon left the capital and headed for Leeds, there he met Isaac Dewhirst, the owner of a Leeds warehouse, in 1884. A deal was arranged whereby Marks agreed to buy goods from Dewhirst and sell them in nearby villages. The venture was a success and enabled Marks to raise enough capital to establish a stall in Leeds' open market. He also sold goods at Castleford and Wakefield markets. In 1891 he opened a stall in Wigan Market Hall , he also moved to live in Wigan about that time. He made his home in 152 Great George Street where his daughter Miriam was born on 1st February 1892 . An interesting fact on the Birth Certificate his signature is marked with an ' X ' he also resided at 57 Darlington Street before leaving Wigan for Manchester in 1896.

On 27th March 1897 the Mayor of Wigan Councillor Robert Richards and the Chief of Police , Captain A Bell confirmed to the Home Office a period of residence of Michael Marks and gave a character reference in connection with his application for naturalisation. On 5 May 1897, Michael Marks was naturalised as a British subject.

Why Wigan from Leeds ? I think it's fair to assume two factors would have influenced his decision, the opening of The Wigan Market Hall in 1877. Covered markets were a fairly new phenomenon allowing trade to be conducted six days a week, instead of just on market days . The second I feel sure was that there was vibrant Jewish community in Wigan at that time with its own Synagogue situated in Great George Street, probably in converted house - the street where he made his home ,it is surly too much to be just a coincidence !

To digress briefly, it was reported in The Wigan Observer on 28th. of October 1888 the Rabbi of the Wigan Synagogue ,Rev Bercovitz a Russian -born pastor to Jewish community was killed in Wallgate when a horse escaped from its cart . The cart veered off the road and hit the reverend gentleman killing him instantly . He left a wife and five children , the newspaper went on to describe him as being held in great respect not only by his all his flock but by all who knew him. I include this to illustrate how assimilated the Jewish community was in Wigan at that time.

The business was expanding at such a rate that Michael Marks required a partner and capital - enter Tom Spencer , a bookkeeper at Isaac Dewhirst who paid £300 for a half share of the business consisting of 8 Bazaars and a a warehouse in Wigan on the 28th of September 1894 , Marks and Spencer was born in Wigan . In 1900 the company opened a Bazaar at 29 Makinsons Arcade . 1918 a shop was opened in Standishgate . On the 2nd of October 1931 the business was transferred a much larger store at 11 Standishgate (sight of the present store ) at the same time the Makinsons Arcade Bazaar closed

In is Israel Sieff memoirs , he recalls that his friend and later brother- in-law Simon Marks son of Michael related that during his time in Wigan , Simon aged four after hearing the patter of clogs on the cobbled streets begged his Father for a pair, he later wrote , many years later , ' At night I would wrap them up in brown paper and put them under my pillow, I wanted be like the other children ' Both the men mentioned in this paragraph went on to be chairmen of M&S and both were given life peerages . Simon during his tenure adopted the brand name ' St Michael ' in honour of his Father.

In 1903 Marks and Spencer became a limited company. So successful had the company become that the Thomas Spencer's £300 ( today's equivalent £33554 ,2019 ) investment grew to £ 15,000 ( £ 1,58214 2019 ) , not a bad return in 7 years ! He retired from the company later that year, he died in 1905 aged 51 . Michael Marks died in 1907 aged 48. It's fair to say that both men died before their time , at that time a man could reasonably expect to live to 57 .

The profits generated in Wigan and the other early outlets sowed the seeds for the company as it is today . You cannot but wonder what Michael Marks and Thomas Spencer would think of the decision to abandon Wigan centre after 125 years . Abandon is an emotive word I know but that is exactly how it feels . The company had an enviable reputation for caring for staff and customers alike, that accolade is beginning to look a little thin .

I'm aware that the company is to open a food only outlet at Robin Park and whilst this is welcomed by many it will surely lead to a further exodus of footfall from the town centre threatening other businesses . This move to out of town shopping is by no means confined to Wigan it is a country wide trend . However much we lament the degrading of town centres and think it should be reversed it's rather like King Canute trying to stop the tide; or the more modern version of that maxim ' trying to put toothpaste back in the tube ' - sad but undeniably true .