

Christmas Stories to Melt the Heart.

I started work at Lowe's Department store in 1960; before then I could never have imagined how important the Christmas season was to the retail trade, every department had a large increase in trade, particularly toys. Lowe's had one of the largest, if not the largest toy department in Wigan.

To give an idea of the importance of this department, it was managed by a younger member of the Lowe family, Mr Jim Lowe; a hackneyed phrase I know but he really is one of nature's gentlemen, now in his eighties and living in North Wales. A massive date in the festive calendar was when Father Christmas came in great fanfare to the store; it brought the town to a standstill.



This brings me to the first part of the story. I can't be sure of the exact date when this heart warming incident happened, however I know it was December 1962. Father Christmas, as usual, had been very busy in his grotto, parents with children in tow would queue for an hour or more to see Santa Claus. The department was set out with toys of every description, Silver Cross Dolls Prams display, a favourite for girls; an absolute must for boys and dads was the layout of train sets with trains going in every direction, in and out of tunnels, signals changing as they went. The showcases helped relieve the boredom while awaiting your turn to go into the magical grotto.



I must admit, I had always wanted an 'electric train set' but Mam thought that electricity and children didn't mix well, no matter how I tried to explain that transformers resulted in a reduced voltage and are completely safe; alas to no avail, no amount assurance would convince her. I had to be, and was, satisfied with a clockwork version.

However, I must confess a little bit of envy crept in when a lad from my class became the proud owner of a 'Hornby Electric Train Set' with tunnels and signals to boot. I am happy to report that I made a tunnel out of a shoebox covered with green crepe paper.

Being completely unpractical (then, as now) in every way, I was quite pleased with my, at least as I saw it, 'ingenuity'. Mam readily agreed and thought me very clever. Mothers can always be relied upon to say the right thing - I think it's called 'humouring'!

However, back to story and in particular the day in question. Father Christmas had gone to the tearoom for a well earned break, as had the lady who took payment and issued a ticket, to give to Father Christmas who would give a present. Whilst they were away for their tea break a lady with 2 children was seen by a member of staff to take 2 tickets without payment. The member of staff reported the matter to management and she was taken to Mr.



Harold Lowe

Harold Lowe's office. The incident of course went through the store like wildfire. Everyone was expecting the police to be called or more likely the family to be escorted from the store in disgrace.

What happened next will bring a lump to the throat. Mr. Lowe asked the staff from the top floor to decamp to the second floor; he then accompanied her and the children from his office which had been created in the loft space of the store, to the third floor, opened the door to the fire escape stairs situated on the outside, so the family didn't have the embarrassment of walking through the store. Nobody knows what was said in the office that day but it was assumed the reason the lady took the tickets was because she couldn't afford to buy them, this I must add was conjecture on the part of the staff; nevertheless what happened

next, I think gives credence to that notion.

Mr. Lowe never mentioned the occurrence to anyone with the exception of Tommy Moore, the van driver, who was sworn to secrecy and instructed to deliver a selection of toys to the family's home in time for Christmas. Tommy never betrayed the trust placed in him; thus fortunately the family's name and address never came to light. This episode shows what a caring family firm Lowe's was. You could never imagine anything like that happening today when most family run department stores have disappeared from the High Street and society is the poorer for that. It almost seems that this part of the article could have come straight from the pages of a Dickens novel.

The second part of the story comes from more recent times, but no less moving for that. For well over 25 years I've been a 'stand in' for Father Christmas at several schools and Christmas Fayre's I must say it's something I greatly enjoy doing, it is a wonderful privilege to be able to share in children's dreams. Of course I've picked up many amusing stories and a few sad ones along the way, such as; requests ranging from a " Real Unicorn" to a "Jig Saw that would do itself"; a puppy is a perennial request. One child, when asked what he would like, replied in a truculent way " I told you at Debenhams "!



During the whole time I've played the part, asking many hundreds possibly thousands of children "What would you like Father Christmas to bring on Christmas Morning?", only on three occasions, in all those years, has a child asked for something for someone other than themselves. The most recent was at a Christmas Fayre; a child asked for a wallet for his Dad, it transpired that his Dad had lost his wallet that morning. Another time at a school, when I asked the question of a young boy, he replied " A ring for me Mum", just that, not a mention of anything for himself. I asked his teacher to let his Mum know that he had asked for something for her; I'm sure she must have been proud of him and I'm certain he will become an outstanding son to her.

However, the one that will live with me forever, a little girl asked in a matter of fact, and thankfully in an unemotional way, "Can my Nan come from heaven for Christmas "? What made it all the more heart wrenching, her Mum was with her and burst into tears, which she tried hard to stifle. If there is one thing more harrowing than watching someone crying, it is to see someone trying not to cry. I don't mind telling you the situation traumatised me , I honestly can't remember what I said, it was so moving; you would have to have a heart of stone not to be overwhelmed by such a heart-breaking appeal . In truth, and I am not ashamed to say, I wasn't very far from tears myself !