

Harold Knowles concludes his memories of

ASHTON-IN-MAKERFIELD DURING THE 1930's

The Market and Street Traders

During my childhood many different hawkers came round the streets peddling their wares or offering services. Some vendors came on a regular basis calling on customers who would have placed a standing order for goods or services. These would include the milkman, the paper boy, the postman, the baker with bread, cakes and pies, the butcher, the coal man, the window cleaner, the grocer's boy, the paraffin man and the 'pop' man.

Others, though coming round on a regular basis, offered optional goods or services. There were ice cream vendors, rag and bone men, fruit and vegetable vendors, fishmongers, salt vendors with their large blocks of white salt from which they would cut, with a saw, the amount required. Lamp lighters with their long poles came round to turn the gas lamps on when darkness fell, dustmen came weekly to empty the bins - a dirty, dusty business in the days of almost universal coal fires and open dustcarts. Although a declining service because of cheap alarm clocks, knockers-up still plied their trade in some areas.

The paraffin man who came round where I lived had a motor lorry with a large tank of paraffin on the back. Mr Billingham, as he was called, had an ironmongers shop in Bryn Street, Ashton and, from his lorry, in addition to the paraffin, he sold a selection of hardware goods such as brushes, soaps, polishes, mops and buckets etc. People would bring out their containers, usually a metal drum, which Mr. Billingham, using a large funnel would fill from a brass tap on the side of the paraffin tank. The sale of paraffin was a most essential service in the days when some houses didn't even have gas laid on let alone electricity, and all

lighting in the house was by paraffin lamp or candles.

The 'pop' man

The 'pop' man came round in a motor lorry with large glass bottles of lemonade, Tizer, American Cream Soda, Dandelion and Burdock etc. He

Dear Mr. Gillies,

I write to say how greatly obliged I am to your colleague, Nicholas Webb, for the information he has given about Ashton Baths in Issue No. 20 of *Past Forward*. Mr. Webb has filled in many gaps in my knowledge of the circumstances relating to the "rise and fall" of the Baths.

A few months ago, William Robinson from Abram was kind enough to write to me with some information, which had been passed to him about his Uncle Frank. His Uncle Frank had been swimming in the Baths during the First World War, probably shortly before the closure. Mr. Robinson also knew of the Baths Hall being used during the 1926 General Strike for the provision of dinners (presumably free) for local schoolchildren. My own recollection is the Baths Hall also being used, during the 1930's, for the provision of free dinners for the children of men who were unemployed.

Whilst it was, undoubtedly, a very great loss to Ashton that there was no place where local people could swim in safety, the Council did their very best to maximise the Public Hall use of the building, and weekly dances to the music of Ronnie Hall and his Band, and Bert Webb and his Hawaiian Serenaders (yes, really!) were very popular, particularly during the war years.

would collect your empties and leave your regular order of, perhaps, three or four bottles. Fishmongers had horse-drawn carts and small motor lorries or vans; the fish was kept fresh on blocks of ice or on heaps of crushed ice. In the days before general ownership of domestic refrigerators the fishmonger could be relied on to sell a fresh product for lunch or tea on the day he came round.

Coal men, for the most part, used motor lorries with flat bodies on which one or two layers of 1 cwt. sacks of coal were stacked upright with a pronounced forward lean so that the forward motion of the lorry didn't cause them to fall off. The sacks of coal were open at the top and the coal man would stand with his back to the lorry and,

reaching back over his shoulders, would pull a sack forward onto his back on which he wore a large piece of thick stiff leather reinforced with metal studs to protect his back against the jagged edges of the coal.

One unique trader who came round the area in the mid to late evening was the mobile fish and chip cart, known to everyone as 'Chip Billy'. The cart, or van, was horse drawn on four wooden, iron-shod wheels. Inside was a solid fuel fire which heated the fat boiler for frying the fish and chips. In fact, the inside of the van was virtually a scaled-down fish and chip shop. Billy would arrive in our street at about 9 p.m. - not every night - and announce his presence by ringing a large hand bell. He would serve you from a counter built into the side of the van and he would normally stay in our street for about 10 minutes, or longer if demand so warranted. I don't suppose Chip Billy would even get a licence to trade these days. He would probably contravene every regulation in the book!

"Knives to grind"

At much less frequent intervals, though still on a regular basis, we had the visits of the knife and scissor grinders. They had a type of bicycle or hand cart which was equipped with a large grindstone operated by a treadle arrangement. They would make their presence known by shouting in the middle of the street, very loudly, such appropriate calls as 'knives to grind!' or 'scissors to grind!' Word would quickly pass around the streets that the knife grinder was here and people would bring out their kitchen knives and scissors to be sharpened for a copper or two. The knife grinder's visits were very popular with us kids because he used to put on a bit of a show for us by sending up showers of

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sparks from the grindstone. It was good business practice too because we would pester our mums to bring out knives and scissors to be sharpened so that we could see more sparks.

Another irregular 'regular' was the pot-man. As with the knife sharpener his mode of transport would be hand cart or tricycle. He was another of the vendors who solicited trade by shouting in the middle of the street, in his case, 'Pots to mend!' as loudly as he could. We kids didn't bother much about the pot-man - he didn't strike sparks!

The ice cream vendors came with a variety of forms of transport. The most basic was a type of two-wheeled hand cart, the wheels being wooden with iron 'tyres' about two feet in diameter. This hand cart would be pushed around the streets, trade being drummed up by means of a hand bell. The ice cream was in a container which sat on a bed of dry ice and was of the soft variety. I spent a few days of one summer holiday helping an older lad I knew to push his hand cart around but the novelty soon faded. There were also tricycle ice cream carts, very similar to the hand carts but with three wheels and pedals. The top of the range was the motorised van but we didn't see many of those.

Gimcrack shoddy goods

There were also the door to door salesmen. Some of these were regular and, indeed, often welcome having been calling for years. Mostly they sold brushes, cotton, needles etc. from suitcases which they carried from door to door. There were other callers who were rather less welcome, selling gimcrack shoddy goods by means of a glib tongue and slick patter. There were the con-men - the 'We'll give you a good price for your

old gold and silver' merchants who then doled out a few shillings to bemused old ladies for quite valuable family heirlooms. Posh looking chaps in a smart suit and collar and tie would sell you spectacles whether or not you needed them. Enough patent medicine was sold by door to door salesmen to float the QE II - much of it was sugar and water with a bit of colouring and flavouring but they swore it would cure everything from pneumonia to arthritis!

In the early 1930's full employment was a dream rather than a reality and many men were unable to find work. This social problem was reflected on the streets in the number of beggars, street singers and buskers to be found in most towns. Men would stand on street corners, literally cap in hand, singing popular ballads of the day. The most popular were the hugely sentimental favourites such as 'Danny Boy', 'My Ain Folk' and other music hall songs. Mouth organs were very common but those with any pretence to musical skill went a step further with the trumpet, concertina, and, very popular, the piano accordion. Solo singers were more likely to be found in the residential streets where they might be given food instead of, or as well as, money. Sometimes, on market days and in the town centre where large numbers of people might be found, a group of buskers would put on a bit of a show with music, singing, and perhaps a display of clog dancing which was always very popular.

The 1930's was, in many ways, a great time to be a young boy. In those days children of seven or eight years old could roam and play in the streets without a great deal of danger. There was always something to see, some entertainment to watch or listen to and, as kids, we weren't expected to pay - it was all free.

The Market

The open market in Ashton was held every Saturday; in the 1930's it consisted of a number of permanent enclosed stalls which could be locked during the week, the remainder being open stalls which were erected and

dismantled the same day. There would be the usual type of market goods ranging from clothes, food of all types, fruit and vegetables, second-hand goods, floor coverings, toys and novelty goods to books, magazines and newspapers. One stall was devoted entirely to the sale of tripe of all kinds. There was black and white tripe plus cow heels, pig's trotters, brawn or 'pigs head', elder, savoury 'ducks' and black puddings. Just before the market closed, kids would go to the tripe stall for a 'haporth' of tripe bits. These were the off-cut pieces which had been cut from tripe as it was being weighed during the day and for a halfpenny you could get quite a lot of tripe bits wrapped in greaseproof paper. With lashings of vinegar and salt and pepper they were very tasty.

In the winter when it went dark the stalls of the traders would be illuminated by naphtha lamps which gave a strange and evocative, almost surreal, glow. The evening was in some ways the busiest time on the market and large crowds would gather around the china and crockery stalls and the linoleum sellers. The latter used to operate from the back of a large van and they would sell rolls of linoleum by the 'Dutch Auction' method. This is where the price is called by the auctioneer and is progressively reduced until someone in the crowd shouts out to pay the last price called. The linoleum sellers would stand in the open tailboard of their van and, holding one end of a roll of linoleum, they would throw the rolled end off the tailboard letting it unroll in front of the crowd. With each price reduction the auctioneer would give the flat linoleum a loud slap purposely to heighten the tension so that someone in the crowd might bid at a higher price so as not to lose the lino to another bidder. It was of course, the first bidder (or person who shouted acceptance of the latest price), who got the lino. The trick was to try to hold ones nerve until the price came down really low, taking a chance that no one else would jump in first, and of course the auctioneer had a repertoire of jokes and patter to

jolly the crowd along and keep them in a good mood. The atmosphere with the crowd, the auctioneer slapping the lino and cracking his jokes, the tension and the naphtha lamps, combined to create a picture which even so long afterwards, I can see clearly as I write.

Knick knacks galore

The same was true of the china and crockery merchants. They worked from large stalls where they would set up a display of the goods they were selling. They had tea sets and dinner services, both china and earthenware, fruit sets of glass and china, tea pots fancy and plain, ornaments and knick-knacks galore together with packing cases packed to the brim with mundane items of crockery such as pudding basins and plain white earthenware cups, saucers and plates. The china sellers operated on the same basis as the linoleum chaps i.e. by 'Dutch Auction' but they had more scope for entertaining the crowds because of the more diverse range of their goods. They would hold a full tea set in their hands and half juggle with it, throwing it up in the air and catching it again with no breakages. For us kids it was great entertainment although the show was sometimes so fascinating we didn't leave and would catch it in the neck for getting home late.

Finally

I have just proof-read my article and I'm astonished at how much I've remembered. I'm even more astonished at how much I've left out! But I think I've included the important stuff and, hopefully, managed to capture the essence of growing up in a Lancashire town in the 1930's.

When I began this article I intended it to be an account of my years at Ashton Grammar School but it grew into more, much more. It is fitting that I acknowledge here the debt I owe to the school. I have enjoyed a successful career as a Chartered Civil Engineer. The first steps towards that career were taken at Ashton Grammar School.

