

Bernard Osborn's Shop To Close

It seems that Bernard Osborn's shop is finally to close at the end of March, after 80 years serving the people of Aston Abbots. There had been a shop in the village earlier in the last century, but it had gone out of business before Osborn's opened.

When I interviewed Bernard for The Chronicle a few years ago he told me, "My mother and father started the shop here in Aston when they were married. They moved to the Old Forge, then they moved down here. It would have been 1926."

Bernard's father had been a tea and coffee blender, although that was not what his family had wanted him to do. "My father's family were engineers. They used to do the old steam engines, and he was the odd one out - they wanted him to go in to the engineering business and he rebelled and went into the grocery trade. Mother, she loved the shop. Like a lot of the people years ago, they potted. They didn't kill themselves with work, but they were going gently all the time. They did things in their own time."

Life was very different back then, when the village shop was a central part of village life. Bernard remembers how they used to run "accounts" for local people: "In years gone by The Abbey was the main employer in the area. They paid their men at 12 o'clock on Saturday and then the men would come down to shop and settle the account for the few things they had put 'on book' during the week. Running a book or an account was all part and parcel of a village shop."

As a boy, Bernard often helped out in the shop. When the war came, much changed. "The early part of the war my father did the Post Office. They hadn't got a postman so the Head Postmaster rang him up and said could he undertake deliveries. For years I delivered the mail round Aston. That was on the carrier bike - a big wheel one. Then we lashed out on a little wheel one with a big basket and I took the lady who used to live up at Longmoor home in that basket more than once! You had to make sure you were sitting on the saddle before she got in there otherwise you went arse upwards.

"Of course wartime and just after the war, we were very busy here. Village shops were busy - that was the heyday of them - because people could not go in to town and that. We used to sell an awful lot of stuff in those days."

After completing his National Service, Bernard returned to Aston Abbots. "I did very well in the Air Force and they wanted me to stop in. They offered me a post straight away in Japan, but my one aim was to come out and that was one of the silliest things I've ever done you know, come back here! It was kind of expected of you, wasn't it, to move back into the family business."

Bernard and Valerie moved to Cublington after the war, but Bernard has continued to run the shop in Aston Abbots. At one time he was President of the Aylesbury District Wavy Line Association. But he has seen the growth of the supermarkets



and the changes in village lifestyle gradually erode the business. "Things have changed. The amount of deliveries and stuff we used to have in, possibly six boxes of butter a week, things like that. But today... I just can't sell it within the sell-by date. It's just had to go like so many other things."

Back in 2000 I asked him if he was saddened by the decline in trade? "Well yes, to a point. You think you've got the right product, the price is right, but people still don't bother. Then once in a while people come in and they say 'I didn't know you stocked so and so', or 'You're cheaper than Tesco's' and things like that, but they still won't use the village shop now. Years ago we used to carry an awful lot more stuff. It's quantity again. A box of bananas is 28 pounds - I just couldn't sell it.

"Little shops like this.... It's things like the rates and so on, which are crippling. You're penalised for giving a service... Truthfully, money-wise, I've propped this up for years." Bernard isn't bitter, although he recognises that the trade for his village shop has gone forever, "Oh no, no. It won't come back!"

Now in his 70s, Bernard has finally decided to retire. "The village doesn't want a shop. We have a few loyal customers.... but it's been a bit of a hobby". He tells me that he will close the shop at the end of March.

Perhaps Bernard is right, perhaps the village doesn't really want a shop. He is almost certainly right that there are not really enough houses in Aston Abbots to support one. However, he and his father provided a valuable service to the village for many decades. Even in recent years, when the shop became just a shadow of what it once was, there have been many of the older generation who have been very grateful for the service he provided. Quite a few villagers have been in the habit of popping into the shop for a bit of a chat with Bernard and I know that he will be very much missed.

So how does Bernard feel, now that the decision is made? "Truthfully, I will miss it," he says. And we will miss him.

~ Phil Spooner