

## **Shop that mirrored 200 years of change**

*A Norfolk ironmonger's shop now closed after 200 years of trading, revealed on its shelves two centuries of social history and change.*

There are more interesting ways of studying social history than in books. The closing of an ironmonger's shop, after two hundred years of trading, has shown me in a fascinating way how the tides of change have ebbed and flowed over rural life. Changes in lighting, cooking, travel, farming, sport and craftsmanship – revealed by goods on the shelves of a picturesque 18th century premises making a corner of Reepham's market square.

The square has its own charm, with thatched and Georgian houses, Flemish and crow-step gables, and two parish churches enclosed by the winding wall of one churchyard.

The ironmongery is itself a little kingdom, with two double-fronted shops, attics, cellars and a neighbourly medley of store-rooms and granary. Beneath four panes of "bulls-eye" glass I entered the main shop, which resembled Hampton Court maze with its passages and stairs.

One stairway beneath the main counter led to a cellar. I bent double under the counter to enter this Ali Baba's cavern. Instead of oil jars I found two large tanks, one for linseed oil and the other for lard oil. The spillings of generations mixed with sawdust caked the floor, and wall racks held paint, turpentine, black harness oil, and preparations only old tradesmen would recognise. A dozen smells also competed for recognition; linseed oil won easily.

In an attic, beneath adze-trimmed beams, were scores of parcels that had slept snug on their dusty shelves for a century. They contained nails (mostly hand-made); nails for carpenters, builders, wagon wheel tyres and strakes; nails for shoeing horses and the bullocks that once worked ploughs; frost nails and caulking nails. Here I tried out a machine that might have eased the drudgery of knife cleaning fifty years ago. "Tortoise" stoves elbowed door furniture into a corner, some would have graced a mansion and some a coal shed. A tub of gum Arabic (used for starching shirt fronts in Edwardian times), scythe blades and plough blades, put back the clock half a century.

Climbing up cobwebby stairs to the seed warehouse, I skirted bins labelled clover, rape, trefoil and saw a set of seed riddles and a set of measures made in Dereham by Bradley and Utting and a flailing stool. The operator sat on one end, laid the corn on the other and beat it with a swipe of a hand flail.

In the yard was a gunpowder magazine for cartridges were made here. A hundred cases were set up in a frame, filled with powder, shot and wadding and the ends rolled in with a treadle machine – now only fit for the scrap heap.

The proprietors, Mr E Gibbs and his sister, showed me the main shed with its countless drawers each bearing a sample of the contents nailed to the front. What a cavalcade of village life they represented. There were brass plug-taps for wine barrels of halls or public houses (some had a locking device – and probably needed it). Cattle clippers, pig and bull rings, “humbugs” for putting in the nostrils of cows when giving a medicinal drink, cheese wire; a key for fitting skates and ancient brass gear for shutters and blinds.

Some peculiar needles puzzled me – they were larding needles used to pierce meat on a spit and draw off the grease into a larding tray. I handled lamp glasses of all shapes and curious tools for many crafts made in an age when wearing value mattered more than a glossy finish.

In the office was a “wheelers’ round”, used by wheelwrights to measure iron, for re-tyring cart wheels, and well-thumbed price books going back to Victoria’s golden reign, listing nails at 10s. 6d. a cwt., a bass broom at two pence, and copper sheet at fifteen pence a pound.

My brow furrowed as I picked up a swan-necked object – a stand for goffering irons! There was an ancient machine with a turntable for sharpening horse-clipper blades; unopened boxes of candle snuffers; a whip socket and undressed leather for pump clacks.

Miss Gibbs recalled, as a girl, selling “penn’orths” of red ochre for smartening doorsteps, and “penn’orths” of black gunpowder for cleaning out oven and copper flues. Had I known, in my boyhood, what fun I would have had with mother’s wall oven!

As a lad, Mr Gibbs got a frisky pony from the meadow and took down sixteen shutters for the shop to open at 7 a.m. It closed at 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. on Saturdays. Thursday was half-day – it closed at 4 p.m.! He also remembered a tub containing macassa oil which his father boiled with beeswax and oil of lavender to make a hair pomade. We looked in vain for some needles used to make up straw and oat flight mattresses.

Turning out more drawers we conjectured on the use of “Rotten Stone” powder, and green copperas (was it used to prevent lime rubbing off walls?). There were dozens of other objects, once in common use, now museum pieces. They were facets of bygone rural life; peepholes on to a half-forgotten yesterday. In fact, beneath the many-angled roofs was two hundred years of social history, told in oil lamps, flat irons, tarred twine – and, I suppose, “Rotten Stone”.

*This article written by Cyril Jolly appeared in the Eastern Daily Press in April 1967, shortly after the Edward Gibbs & Son business closed. It was republished in the Reepham Society Newsletter, Spring 1989.*