

The block of premises at the west end of the Market Place and at Town End corner comprising two shops with a dwelling house at each end was built about 1767. One shop with a large dwelling house was an ironmongers and seed merchant - and the adjoining shop nearer the Market Place was a grocers shop and the occupant used the house as a dwelling house.

In 1851 William George had the ironmongers shop with seed store. I have no record of who had the shop before him unless it was his mother, as in one of the directories we found reference to Mrs George, shopkeeper. William George was a man of peculiar habits and afraid that he would miss a penny - frequently ate his breakfast of bread and milk on the doorstep at 7 am. Somewhere to be found in the churchyard near to the footpath leading to the Back Street is his tombstone - stating his name and "Ironmonger of this Parish".

The next occupant was S W & W Leeds, father and son - they held the business from some time in the 1870s to 1888. The Leeds (mother and daughter-in-law went to live on Church Hill in adjoining houses. In 1888 Edward Gibbs, my father, took over the business. He was a young man born at Keeling Hall, Foulsham and educated at the Middle School in Norwich. His parents moved to Quebec Farm at Dereham and since farming was at a very low ebb his father apprenticed him to the next best thing - an ironmonger. He served his apprenticeship in Dereham and came to trade on his own in Reepham after his marriage in October 1888.

In the 1890s the grocer's shop became vacant and my father took this over and made an entrance from the existing shop and expanded this shop as a showroom for garden seeds, household goods etc. The small house attached he sub-let to the Reading Room Committee.

The landlord was Mr J J Bishop of Bishop's Removals, Fitzroy Square, London - I do not know when Mr Bishop acquired this property - he may have been a relative of Mr George (or the Leeds) but he also owned the Manor Farm, Kerdistone which he farmed with a Steward in residence. The Steward's name was Charles Timbers and since I was friendly with his nieces as a small child I often went to the Manor Farm to tea and became very well acquainted with the Grandmother tree.

When Mr Bishop Senior died the young son Edgar inherited the property. He decided to sell out and my father bought the ironmongers block. This was about 1907. At that time the building was altered and an additional room with bedroom above was built on to the existing house - a warehouse being demolished for this purpose.

The premises are extensive and it is interesting to note that the warehouses behind the shop are built on two levels - in the same way that the houses are on the south side of the Market Place - I think this indicates that at one time there was a considerable rise - almost a hill in that area.

The ground floor consisted in 1900 of ironmongers shop and showroom, paint house, oil house, gutter house (at right angles) rake or harness house, stable, shed and gunpowder house. Above the stable and rake house and approached by stairs from the rake house is a warehouse, hay house and running along the back of these a big shed known as the iron house - here we kept bar iron, shoeing iron, chain and harness traice, strip iron, etc. This shed leads out on to the level of the yard at the back of Mr John Hall's harness makers shop (now a butcher's shop). Whether this was originally built this way is not known - but our iron bars had always to be unloaded into this shed from Mr Hall's yard. It was quite impossible to get it there otherwise. There was also a nail house on this level in Mr Hall's yard.

Above the gutter house and approached by a staircase from the gutter house was the granary. Again from stairs leading from the granary was a long room above lined with bins for storing seeds and leading from this at right angles was the seed room over the hay house and warehouse. The floor of the seed room did not cover the iron house which makes one think the iron house may have been built on after the original block was built.

Above the shop was one of the bedrooms of the house and at the rear, approached by a staircase were two warehouses on two storeys (first and second floor). After World War I the smaller house at the other end of the block was let for living accommodation except the large room which had been the billiard room of the Reading Room. This was above our showroom, a staircase was installed and it was taken in as an additional showroom and termed the Top Showroom.

A small portion of the Lower Showroom was partitioned off with one window and sub-let to the National and Provincial Bank who attended once a week on Wednesdays market day. When the bank relinquished this about five years later it was let as a Wool Shop for a great number of years.

With all this vast amount of warehouses and space one can imagine how as young children we revelled in the opportunities for hide and seek and such games with our friends. Underneath the ironmongers shop is a cellar known as "The Cellar". Oddly enough the next shop or showroom has no cellar and seems to be on firm ground, but the smaller house adjoining the showroom has a large cellar with the remains of a fireplace and we think at one time it was the kitchen of that house. This was not let but taken into our business and it is known as the "Further Cellar".

At about 1920 my brother joined the business as a partner and I became a partner in about 1955.

The variety of goods stocked was enormous and varied as the years and ideas advanced. The business, in fact, was one in which one was constantly learning - rather specialised - and my father frequently told a customer if a remark was passed about the variety of stock and the knowledge that was needed that: "this is not a business, you know, it's a specialised profession."

In the early part of the century ironmongers were the only shops to stock household hardware such as saucepans, kettles, lamps and kitchen utensils generally and there was much consternation when it was learned that Woolworths were selling saucepans etc at a much cheaper price than we could buy them. Then when the multiple store and departmental store became much more general the ironmonger lost a lot of the general hardware trade and as my father used to remark: "Why can't they stick to their own trade and not dabble in other peoples - they know nothing of real ironmongery trade." Because in fact we were also Black Ironmongers, this dealt with the heavier side of ironmongery and so was much more interesting - builders ironmongery, blacksmiths needs and the like - agricultural needs but not machinery.

To mention the goods that we stocked in the yard:

1. Paint House

Red and white lead, methylated spirits and sheet glass - here we had a special table for cutting glass and to cut glass was a fairly specialised job in those days. My father used to cut most of it with a beautiful diamond cutter that was kept in a drawer in his desk and no one was allowed to use it except one Head Assistant who really was equally as good.

I tried to do this once but wasted so much glass I dare not try any more.

2. Gutter House

Gutters of every description and all the fittings necessary for these, wire netting, boiled oil, Gallipoli oil (for traction engines), turps, etc, galvanised buckets, etc.

3. Rake House

Everything for the farmer in the harvestfield in the woodware line. Rakes, pitch forks, wheat sheaf forks, axe, hammer and sledge hammer handles, Waterloo Rubs. These latter were for sharpening scythes. Although some farmers still preferred these they were later replaced by stones made of Carborundum.

4. Stable

In those days the stable was occupied by our horse, as all goods were delivered by our trade cart. We were very proud of our trade turn-out: black outlined with red and the name on each side. Again it was a sad day when we sold the horse as we were attached to him so much, and had to keep up with the times with motor transport.

5. The Gunpowder House

Here we kept all types of gunpowder and bullets. It is interesting to note that we had our own cartridge making machine - a hundred were made at a time by hand and our Head Assistant was the only one who made them. There was a special formula of quantities and sizes of shot and gunpowder used - I could scarcely describe the process - it would be boring (no pun meant) to write it all down, but as a small child nothing pleased me more than to be allowed to help with this job, and I saw no fear of being blown up. Gibbs' hand made cartridges were renowned far and wide and to be preferred to the proprietary makes.

This project died out completely as it was found that the cost of materials did not justify a reasonable price to compare with the price of the well-known makes of Kynoch - we sold in the latter years of the business upwards of 100,000 cartridges a year.

6. In the warehouse above the Rake House we kept chain of all sizes, glass tiles, wagon cluts (obsolete) and spades and shovels of every description. My father loved his business and prided himself on having goods in stock that sometimes could not be bought elsewhere. He had Yarmouth Coal shovels (a special shape and a special make), ordinary shovels of different sizes, digging spades, rabbiting and mole spades, also draining tools (these were a special type of spade), etc.

7. Hay House

In the hay house itself in the early years of the century - hay for the horse was kept and there was a special hole through which this was forked into the manger below (I fell through this once - onto the hay in the manger!) Crushed oats were kept here too - also for the horse and a hand hay cutter. A very poor old man almost in tatters would come to cut the hay (and earn, I suppose, a shilling) because my father was sorry for him. He would come once a week, have a good meal sent out to him in the stable and a parcel of "eats" to take away. Nobody knew where he lived - sometimes sleeping rough and I believe in the winter he used to sleep in the derelict tannery, I am not sure about this. From time to time this old man would be overjoyed if some one would give him an old coat or cap. His trousers were tied up with string. With the passing of Spirit Gaskin (he used to drink all he earned - usually cheap beer) and the passing of the horse, the Hay House became an ordinary warehouse for wall ovens and skeps. These last are items that have entirely passed out of use - skeps for feeding cattle we sold by the hundreds of dozen.

These were procured first of all from a basket maker at Dereham and later from Dennington in Suffolk where the business is still running by the son of the original basket maker.

8. Iron House

In the iron house we kept angle irons, harness traice, plough traice and several types of bar iron - such as shoe bars and tyre bars, also oven plates. These were thick slabs of iron - various sizes according to the size of the oven and various weights. Iron was all sold by weight and we had a special weighing machine that would take the bars across it. We also kept all sizes and widths of hoop iron here.

7A to return to the skeps made of basket ware - it is interesting tonote that in the early part of the century a Mr Rainbird living in the maltings and now derelict house adjoining Candle Court made baskets and skeps. They used to hang outside his door in the Back Street.

9. The further cellar was used for an odd selection of stock. Flower pots of all sizes from 3" to 20" used to be delivered from Wattisfield in Suffolk where they are still made. All kinds of rope were here as well in huge coils of various sizes - 1"-1½" was for wagon ropes which were made up from 15 yard lengths - whipped at one end with tarred string and a large eye spliced at the other end. A smaller size was used for plough lines. These were cut off in 18 ft lengths and whipped at either end and coiled up. Both of these items became obsolete but in the old days to make these up was a job for a slow day in the shop. We also kept tarred line down here which gave the cellar a gorgeous tarry smell - like a ship's ropes.

10. The cellar under the shop was quite different in the early days and was both dark and damp. Here we kept hinges of every shape and description from small T hinges to large heavy gate hinges and gate hooks and eyes, heaters for the base irons that were in use then (with the coming of the electric iron these of course went out of fashion), paints of all types and varnishes of many kinds - a very fine one known as Church Door Varnish always fascinated me.

Here also were two tanks of Linseed Oil. It was brought direct from Lynn docks in barrels and had to be run off into these tanks from the road via a hose and the cellar grating was removed. I never understood the reason for keeping Linseed Oil in the cellar - as in the yard was the Oil House where paraffin was stored and plenty of room in the gutter house.

It is interesting to relate that each apprentice in turn forgot to turn the tap off once! - never again!! I can remember the consternation when the floor was found 3 inches deep in Linseed Oil. My father said it was no use blaming the boy after it was done - but the boy had to clean it up with sawdust and any means he could find - without help!

Stockholm Tar was also in this cellar in 1 Lb and 2 lb tins. This was used for sheeps feet I think and with the passing of the keeping of any quantity of sheep the sale of this deteriorated with the exception of an odd tin or two.

11. The warehouse above the shop was a very interesting place to me. Here we kept cutting knives of every description - scythe blades of various kinds, furze, bramble, the larger scythe for grass. Then there were reap hooks of all sizes, slashers for hedging (again in different kinds and sizes) and many types of hedging hook. Each county seemed to have its own shape slightly different from the next county. There was also a Sir Tatton Sykes hook, originally made for a gentleman of that name. It is interesting to note that in all the later catalogues from 1930 onwards there was a Reepham hook. The type our customer required had a slightly different curve at the top from the Lincolnshire variety. My father made a sketch of the variety with size etc and submitted it to the manufacturer - they made it for us and they introduced it to other customers and it became so popular that it was kept as a regular line to be seen in any modern catalogue of Edward Elwell Ltd.

Russell - here be drawing which I'm not trying to copy - Dee

With modern hedge trimming tools the sale of this type of hook, or of any hook in fact, was negligible - except for the gardener.

All manner of saws were here and nails of every description - even Bullock Nails - a relic of the past when bullocks were in regular use on the farms. Twines of all sizes and furnace pans of all sizes from 6 gallon to 16 gallon. These were made of cast iron by only one firm in the country, I believe, in Keighley, Yorkshire. These pans were used of course for the coppers in the wash houses - Coppers - so called because they were originally made of copper until it was found that they could be made from iron treated so that it did not rust or spoil the clothes. Not much more of ancient history here.

12. The top warehouse. A storehouse of ancient, less ancient and fairly modern. As a child there was a wonderful lot of old skates which I loved to explore but never found a pair for my small boots. In any case we did not have as much ice as they must have done when those skates were bought in the 1860s. Another box was full of all kinds of obsolete locks. At one time no saucepan was available except it was made of cast iron. They were in sizes from 2 pints to 14-16 pints and then one came to the cast iron boilers wherein the farmers wives would cook their huge hams - home cured.

There was always a small quantity of Dutch ovens. A curious article that would stand on the hob in front of the range fire. It consisted of a pan about 12" x 7" with an upright about 5" high at each end. These were joined by a thin bar from which meat hooks were suspended. There was attached to each end a half round cover so that when sausages or bacon was suspended from the hooks and placed in front of the fire and were half cooked, the half round lid was turned over and the whole oven turned round so the uncooked food was near the fire.

Russell - here be another drawing - Dee

All our ledgers and invoices were kept here for years and years and if any were to be destroyed the last twenty years were always kept.

My favourite farm tools were kept here - the majestic hay knife used for cutting trusses of hay from the haystack. I used to love the long shiny broad blade with its curved stalk and handle - I suppose it is silly and sentimental to enthuse over a farm tool but to me it was the acme of elegance.

Hurricane lamps were always hanging from the ceiling. These were bought by the $\frac{1}{2}$ gross and sometimes gross at a time. They were needed for all types of farm work - cow sheds, stables and barns - but with the coming of ^{the pressure lantern and later} electricity the sale of these declined and instead of being two or three times a year in grosses the buying was down to the odd dozen.

In those days we had a staff of seven or eight including an apprentice. He was apprenticed for four years - his parents paying £50 for him to be taught his "profession". He received nothing the first year - he would have left school when he was just 14. Pleased to leave school the very week after his birthday and anxious to learn his business. The following years his wages were small but increased each year. At the end he was given his Indentures (which had been signed by his parents at the solicitors) by my father with much ceremony, When the boy was told that wherever he went and whatever he did he would always have these Indentures at his back to show he had been through every branch of the trade and learnt the business thoroughly. Sometimes an apprentice would stay on as an Improver for a year. As a side note - an apprentice who had been at Gibbs always stood a chance of getting a good job wherever he applied as my father had a reputation of being a good master and a good trainer of boys and he instilled into them all that trait of courtesy and consideration that is the hallmark of any good tradesman with real knowledge of what he is selling.

The shop in those days was the most interesting place of all - I loved to be in the shop as a small child and the business was as a person to me - in fact to all the family it was the first consideration always.

There was a wide variety of goods, almost impossible to describe. One section was for tools of every description - these I also loved and still do. All types of pliers, screwdrivers, punches, Farriers pincers, Farriers knives and Farriers leather aprons. With the coming of motor transport and the Blacksmiths closing down in some cases the sale of these last items were lost. There were hammers, wash leathers, paint brushes of all kinds - "whitening" brushes from the coarse grass kinds to the very expensive ones made of hair.

11A To break off and go back to the warehouse - all types of hoes were here including L hoes, dutch hoes, spuds and Stalham hoes. The latter got their name in the same way as the Reepham slasher. They are a swan-necked hoe with the shank and blade in one solid piece (not rivetted on), and were first made in Stalham. These are the hoes in general use today.

Back to the shop - we sold "Red Ochre" - a fine powder in pennorths. I used to be allowed to pack this and it was used for making doorsteps and the brick hearths look smart and tidy when mixed with water.

We used also to sell black gunpowder done up in small "pennorths" for blowing up the chimney under the copper as it often got blocked. Shoe nails were also packeted in 2d packets in different lengths and also we sold shoe leather. No farm worker could afford to have his children's boots soled and always made a fine job of doing it themselves. There were reaper knives for old types of reapers - Massey Harris and all makes. Each different make of reaper took a different shaped blade.

Until 1930 there was no electricity. The shop was lighted by many large oil lamps - both hanging and hand - and it was the first job of the apprentice each morning to trim - fill with oil and clean them - as he has those from our house as well (and we had two hanging and about four hand) the boy had between 12 and 15 lamps to trim.

12A Returning to the top warehouse - there also was to be found at least one gross of candle snuffers - these must have been relics of bygone days as my father had neither bought or sold one pair.

Back to the shop lamps - it was almost a ritual in those days for my father to buy the lamps each autumn and one window was devoted entirely to these set up in tiers. Great excitement when they were unpacked - tall brass ones, tall ones with ruby or blue glass founts, tall ones with china founts painted with flowers in hectic colourings. Small hand lamps of all shapes and sizes - again some of glass containers and some of brass - and last of all the very colourful globes and shades that went with them and by the end of the season most of these would be sold. The coming of pressure lamps and incandescent mantle lamps superceded the ordinary oil lamp and as time advanced into the thirties the sales of these decreased and electric lighting was becoming more general.

At Christmas time the window the other side was always made an attraction. We had an old bottle jack to which was attached a circular tray suspended on chains. When the bottle jack was wound up this would rotate and everything to attract the eye was on display: pen knives, pocket knives, nail scissors, dress makers scissors, barbers scissors and even wallpaper scissors. Scattered around on the floor of the window was cutlery of every description and anything that would look attractive. Also, in the early part of the century from about 1908, a cousin made his home with us and he made most wonderful models. These were always an attraction in another window. One year it was a fully rigged sailing ship about 3 feet long, one year a working mill, another year it was a working model of a carpenters shop with saws working etc and the last year he made a perfect model of a threshing set working with smoke coming from the chimney.

The straw pitcher worked, the drum threshed, and my brother made wee sacks for the corn and the threshing engine itself was a masterpiece. All these, of course, brought sightseers and customers to the shop. In those days these were a source of wonder to the people for miles around - there was not much else to interest them and what today is accepted by all of us was a nine days wonder then. As a matter of interest, the ship was de-rigged and used for the basis of modelling a liner about 4'6" long - working with electric lights showing through the portholes.

This liner and the threshing machine are still happily preserved. I am not sure about the windmill and if anyone is interested I'm sure my cousin's daughter would be delighted to show them. Each in its own way is so perfect. Forgive my seeming pride in relating of this which really is not relative in a large way to the "Saga of the Shop".

We sold sash cord in large quantities and with modern building and the use of Crittall and other windows, the sale of this was a minimum.

There were lockers for cut nails, lath nails, Essex hurdle nails, round wire nails, staples, S hooks, galvanised nails and washers, hooks, hasps, files and all the thousand and one items that go with that type of ironmongery. The stock of bolts ran into thousands - as to each length from one inch to seven inch there were at least 6 - 8 sizes.

Lamp chimneys were of course in great demand, as were the old fashioned steel pokers and hearth sets with long handles. Steel fire guards and fenders. Wooden skewers were sold by the hundred at Christmas time to butchers and used by farmers and their wives for dressing poultry.

Some farmers would have nothing but the old fashioned horn lantern to be used with candles. We specialised in having a good stock of gig and cart lamps - some of them very heavy - with shining reflectors and plenty of brass on them and others less ornate for the farm carts etc. Of course, carriage candles to go with them.

In those days we had a very small office where my father "kept the books". Entries were made from the day book into the ledgers. I used to like to help him at times, never dreaming that one day it would be my job to look after them myself and later still - as a partner - to be responsible for them.

We had a huge credit business. Consequently the keeping of ledgers entailed much writing especially at New Year. No farmer in those days would dream of paying cash and their accounts ran for a year. I have known my father and mother to sit up till midnight writing out accounts before I was old enough to help. One gentleman (!?) came in one day and was most irate with my father for sending in the account at six months. It needed a lot of capital to be able to run a business on these lines. My brother - although in the business after he left school - did not like the office side of the business and never interfered. Later of course this system was changed, accounts were rendered monthly and there was more cash around anyway.

Market Day was a very busy day for us - farmers came in to buy their requirements and my mother when possible would go in to help with the day booking and the till. She was a very pleasant sociable and friendly person and she always had a good word to say to the customers. They liked seeing her too. An amusing incident - during the first world war she was chatting with a rough rather boorish customer who was grumbling about the meat ration - he was evidently a good feeder and could not get enough meat. Mother remarked that at any rate he could get plenty of eggs on the farm to which he replied, in the broadest of Norfolk: "Wha's there in a egg - two mouthfuls?"

This incident was never forgotten by her and was often laughingly referred to.

Screws were there also - again in gross boxes, different sizes to each length. They were in brass and iron - no chromium then. One odd thing that we always kept was a piano hinge. This was on the shelf in the office.

The ceiling of the shop also held treasures: oil cans, well snaps, pig nets and many sundries.

I feel that the half has not been told about these premises. The house attached to the shop was fairly large - a panelled dining room, spacious kitchen and pantry and underground scullery. This scullery had a home brew cellar installed, by the original owner I should imagine. It was complete with racks for wine bottles (about 4 dozen or more) and stools for the barrels of beer. The most I ever saw there was about 2 bottles of whisky and 2 of port and my mother's home made ginger beer.

Very occasionally a firkin of beer (a small barrel). Also there was a built in brick soft water tank which must have held about 300 gallons - at least we were never short of it. There were also two coppers and a small heater stove. The latter was replaced by a small cooking range which was used in my early years. When the extension was built on to the house we had a sitting room in addition to the dining room and five bedrooms. A sixth was made into a bathroom with toilet etc. The water was pumped up into the tank in the top warehouse every Saturday afternoon by the apprentice and one other. We were one of the very few houses in Reepham who had a flush system at that time - about 1908-1910.

Today - 1971 - everything seems to have been reversed. The two shops are again divided and I fear all those wonderful warehouses and outbuildings are not used. The larger house is used as storage room although the smaller house is occupied. I wonder what will be left in another 200 years time. Since building 200 years back so much has happened to the property and there are bound to be further changes to come.

The seed business, although attached to the ironmongers business, was an entirely different type of business and a few details are given over-leaf.

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Marjorie Gibbs' account of the seed business is itemised separately