

Thomas Piercy and the ironmongers' shop of Edward Gibbs and Son

The article in the Spring [1990] Newsletter about Edward Gibbs and Son prompts me to contribute some further details that may be of interest. When I was a small boy my grandfather, Thomas Piercy, worked for Mr Gibbs and I frequently visited the premises. An ironmongers and seed merchants shop may not be deemed a very interesting place but to me it was always fascinating. The shop itself had stairs under the counter leading down to a mysterious cellar and other stairs to rooms above. Throughout the entire premises there was an indescribable smell of turpentine, lard oil, linseed oil and the smell of a dozen other substances.

Across the yard was the seed room. This was reached by ascending a winding staircase to the top floor; at the far end there was a low door with a sign stating, "Mind Your Head". Here the various grass and clover seeds were mixed; these would be sown with barley and when grown would be cut for hay.

Occasionally I was allowed to accompany my grandfather with the horse and cart delivering bars of iron to blacksmiths in the surrounding district. One of these was Hardiments of Kerdiston which was where the horse went to be shod. Another was Millets whose smithy was on the main road to Sparham; in those days, the road was often referred to as the turnpike. The most exciting trip was to Barrets at Lyng; in those days this involved going through the river. This was in the early 1920s when the present bridge had not been built.

I also remember going to Weston House, Weston Longville and Heydon Hall to deliver paraffin. I believe these trips for me came to an end when Mr Gibbs replaced the horse and cart with a Ford lorry. This was driven by a man named Henry Rose; my grandfather never learned to drive.

Grandfather Thomas Piercy had been working at the shop for some years before Mr Gibbs took over the business. He was born in 1861 and lived with his parents at Thorny Farm, Kerdiston, where his father was steward. After leaving school at fourteen he worked on the farm with his father, but in 1879 he decided that he did not much care for farm work and went to work for S & S W Leeds, the ironmongers and seed merchants; he was employed as a carter at fifteen shillings per week (75p).

The two Leedses, uncle and nephew, were both named Stephen (not to be confused with the Whitwell tanner who was another Stephen Leeds). The elder Leeds lived at the shop and the younger at Church Hill in the house now occupied by Mr and Mrs Betts. After working for Leeds for some years Thomas decided to join the Metropolitan Police, but when the Leedses heard of this they promptly revised his wages to one pound per week, quite a good wage a century ago and enough to make him change his mind about the police force.

The business was sold to Mr E Gibbs in 1888. The elder Mrs Leeds (now a widow) moved from the shop and went to live with the other (and younger) Mrs Leeds at Church Hill. When Mr Gibbs purchased and took over the ironmongers' business, he lacked experience in the seed trade. Grandfather by now knew both sides pretty well and initially Mr Gibbs depended on his knowledge of the seed side of the business.

Grandfather's eldest son, Fred, started to learn the trade with Mr Gibbs, but was killed in an accident in the shop in 1904, aged fourteen. His place was taken by another son, Wilfrid, who served for a time and then went to work for a Norwich ironmonger; he was killed in action in France in 1916. Grandfather became a pensioner in 1920, but still went to the shop on a part-time basis. When he died in 1930, he had worked for more than fifty years in employment with Edward Gibbs and Son.

Initially this article was intended to be about the ironmongers' shop, but I suppose it has turned out to be about my grandfather. You could say he was a fixture in that shop for half a century so any article which referred to the history of Edward Gibbs and Son could not be told without including Thomas Piercy.

The old-fashioned ironmongers' shop is now a thing of the past. Those that have survived have adapted their methods and their stock to meet today's requirements. With no horses on farms there are no blacksmiths requiring iron for horse-shoes and wagon tyres. Nobody has oil lamps anymore and there is little demand for paraffin. It is a similar story for the seed merchants. There are not horses needing hay and so there is no call for hay seed. Bullocks are no longer fattened in yards and so farmers do not grow swedes and mangolds. Much as the passing of these traditional trades may be regretted, change is inevitable. Ironmongery is just one of the many trades that once flourished in Reepham and is now gone. In 50 years time will the computers that now fill the shop premises of Edward Gibbs evoke as much nostalgia as does the smell of linseed oil and the sight of hazy sunshine pouring through the mixing of clover, rape and trefoil seeds?

Wesley Piercy

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Picture shows Thomas Piercy (left) and Edward Gibbs Snr mixing seed in the seed room.