

## Still fighting their corner From the corner shop to the MetroCentre, via the supermarket and hypermarket, Sharon Griffiths maps our changing shopping habits over four decades

*The Northern Echo* 01/04/1992

### SHARON GRIFFITHS

Lard had to be cut from 28lb blocks; every portion of sugar, flour and dried fruit was weighed out from big sacks; bacon was cut from the joints that hung from the ceiling. It was a different world when John King took over the village shop early in the 1950s. The shop and post office at Middleton Tyas, near Richmond, had already been in the King family for well over 80 years then. It had been built for Mr King's grandfather in the days when he was known as Collector of Mails. Throughout the three generations, the shop had sold anything and everything. But it has probably changed more in the last 40 years than at any other time. "When I came back from the war, we still had rationing for a few years. Two rashers of bacon a week was all you could have and a small amount of sugar," said Mr King, who with his wife, Agnes, ran the shop for the next 35 years. In those days there were two other shops in the village "and a couple of house shops - people just selling sweets or things from their kitchen." There were a lot more travelling shops too. Lewis and Cooper from Northallerton would deliver regularly. And a man from the Co-op in Croft would cycle over each week to take orders, the goods coming later by van. The really posh people would sometimes by-pass all the local shops when they wanted something extra special for a big occasion. "They'd ring the big stores in London, give them an order in the morning and it would be on the train in the afternoon, and here by evening. It seems amazing now, but that was quite a regular thing with the big houses." Meanwhile, back in the village shop, all that weighing out meant serving customers took time. "Many sent a weekly order in, of course. But people usually just waited. Everyone had more time in those days. "Most people bought most of what they needed in the village. And most of the women were at home. Not so many went out to work as they do now." The Kings always specialised in bacon and cheese "not a lot of varieties the way you have now, but what we had was good, the best". They didn't sell many cakes. Those were the days when to present a visitor with "shop cake" was the sign of a right feckless housewife. But there were plenty of biscuits, sold from the rows of big square tins, with broken ones a bargain. "Everyone just dipping their hand in. No hygiene regulations like now when everything's wrapped and wrapped again." He was one of the first to stock frozen food in the Fifties. Not that villagers were impressed by this innovation. They were very suspicious of frozen vegetables especially. "Being in the country we were used to good fresh stuff. But it eventually got accepted." Other shops in the village closed as more women went out to work, often to Darlington or Richmond, where they'd do the bulk of their shopping. "They didn't have the time any more and we started stocking things like cook-in sauces. They wanted more adventurous meals, but didn't want to have to cook them." Life was getting harder for village shops: "All the little firms we dealt with started to disappear, getting swallowed up by the big boys. The companies we dealt with didn't want to be bothered with small orders from small shops any more. It was a different world.

Having seen and made many changes in their time, the Kings retired five years ago - though only as far as next door, and the sign above the shop still says King, maintaining the links back to 1870 and before. Jim and Nan Hall took over the shop. They introduced a modified self service system and an off-licence section, which does very well, especially for wine. "Times change and you have to keep up with them," says John King. You can hire a video from the village shop to watch with your gourmet meal and bottle of wine. And if you spill your supper in your lap, well, the shop's a dry cleaner's agent too. They still know most of their customers by name. And in an increasingly unsafe world, it's still the sort of place where you can send a small child with a list and a £10 note. "Small shops, corner shops are very important," says Nan Hall. "We're closer to our customers and know what they want and people are beginning to realise that now."

xx

Edition 1  
Section food  
Page f4

Record Number 5487  
Neg Number