

The Village Shop

With the closure of our sole remaining Village Shop, I find myself inevitably looking back to see if we can learn any lessons from history ...

When Sylvia and I came to Kilsby over 40 years ago, the village boasted four shops ... a butcher's, a Co-op, an off-license and general stores, and a post office and stores (later augmented in the 1980s by a health-food shop). It was a busy little community, and friends and neighbours often met whilst shopping in the village.

In the earlier 1900s, between the two World Wars, there had been various other previous shops in Kilsby, including a fish-and-chip shop (next to the Red Lion), a bicycle repair shop (where the Village Hall now stands), a blacksmith's forge (beside the Village Green), a saddlery (on Manor Road), a carpenter's premises and a wheelwright (both up The Banks), a builder's yard (in the house on Main Road now called 'Brooklyn'), a motorcar repair garage (facing the Green), and at least three bakehouses at different times and in different parts of the village. A regular doctor's surgery was also held (at first in the house on Manor Road now known as 'Tudor Cottage' – in those days the house was called 'Graziela', and later in part of the village hall).

The idea of village shops, as we know them today, only dates back to the late 1800s. Before that, tradespeople in each village (dressmakers, seamstresses, washerwomen, cobblers and bootmakers, house-painters and decorators, plumbers, carpenters, and similar small trades) had no formal shop-windows or display areas, but simply operated from their living rooms, kitchens and backyard sheds. A dressmaker or seamstress would visit you for selection of fabrics, measurements and fittings. Incidentally, I remember my own mother and grandmother making all their own clothes in the 1940s and 1950s, with paper patterns spread out on the table-top and piles of assorted fabrics; it was an accepted part of the way of life in those days (and likewise, men knew how to repair the family's bikes and motor car, carry out basic maintenance work around the house, grow their own vegetables and fruit, etc.).

More sophisticated needs were catered for by the carrier's cart – a large horse-drawn covered vehicle (with seats that could be added inside to accommodate occasional passengers) that went into Rugby and Daventry at least once each week. Villagers would place their orders for goods in the shops in those towns, then notify the carrier, and the goods would be collected and delivered in his carrier's cart. Goods for market were also transported from the village into these towns by the same means. This method was in use for centuries, and only declined with the rapid growth of motorised transport after the First World War. I recall speaking in the 1980s with elderly Kilsby villagers who had travelled on the carrier's cart in their childhood.

Kilsby Post Offices

As for post offices, Kilsby had five different offices at various times. The first, in the mid-1800s, was in a butcher's shop and general stores run by Keziah Essen in part of the house now known as The Haven in Essen Lane; the post office relocated in the late 1800s to the top end of Essen Lane (where it would later return in the mid-1900s and continue until 2016), which was at that time the home of Mr Harris the postmaster; and when Mr Harris moved to a smaller brick house along Middle Street in about 1918, the post office moved with him. After Mr Harris died in the 1920s, the post office shifted again, to a hardware shop that stood on what is now the corner of Boxwood Drive (which is why the 'phone box was erected at that location, when the telephone came to Kilsby in the 1930s). When that hardware shop eventually closed in the mid-1900s (driven to the wall, I suspect, by the newly-opened village branch of the Co-op Stores), the post office finally moved back to the top of Essen Lane, and was incorporated into what by then had become the village's main shop.

The origin of our Village Store

The village shop at the top of Essen Lane was founded almost exactly one century ago, at the close of the First World War, when Dick Moloney and his family moved there in 1918. Dick had been a bootmaker before the Great War, and cycled to work every day in Frederick Cook's

boot factory at Long Buckby – but by the end of the war he was an invalid and could no longer manage the long cycle journeys – so he set up as a cobbler and boot-maker in the single-storey extension that had previously been the post office during Mr Harris's time there. For a while the premises also functioned as the meeting room of the Kilsby branch of the British Legion – but that venture ran into financial trouble and closed down, and the Moloney family had to find a new way to supplement Dick's meagre income as a bootmaker. Mrs Moloney had worked as a part-time midwife, and had also taken in sewing – anything to earn a few precious shillings – and now had the bright idea of selling a few sweets and cakes in Dick's little cobbler's shop. Mr Moloney's daughter Leonora (I met her when she was over 80 years old) told me what happened next: "And then people started coming in and asking if we were going to sell other things – cornflakes and sugar, and so on – and eventually she worked it up into quite a nice little business; and we carried on running it through the Second World War and afterwards".

Where next?

Knowing a village's history is important – it helps us to understand our own identity as a community – and at times such as the present, perhaps it can also help us to review our situation and work out where we want to go next.

For instance: What factors have led to this present decline? What are the factors that define a village and shape its character? And how does Kilsby compare with its neighbour villages?

The general decline of shopping in villages is, of course, because virtually everyone now owns a car – allied to the growth since the 1960s of out-of-town supermarkets with plenty of parking space, and further aggravated by the recent emergence of online shopping and purchases delivered by van to your door. In order to survive, village shops have had to become ever more inventive. But in the end, it comes down to a very simple equation: "Use it, or lose it".

The next question – "what defines a village?" – is more difficult; however, most folk would probably list the same few things – a picturesque old church and churchyard, one or two decent pubs, a village green, a village hall, a village school, a tennis court, some pretty rows of old houses, and a shop-cum-post-office, where you can buy stuff without needing to drive for miles, and meet neighbours and catch up on gossip. They might also add: "somewhere small enough that you can get to know your neighbours, and enjoy the pleasure of being a member of a community". We have had some success in fighting off rapacious housing developments that would have destroyed the character of our village ... but meanwhile, we have lost another key aspect of our village identity.

The final question – "how does Kilsby compare" – can also be answered easily. Shopkeepers in Crick and Barby say they have already seen a significant increase in trade since our own village shop closed. Those villages are retaining an important part of their village identity – and without our own village shop, we risk the loss of a daily meeting-place and part of our own identity as a community.

Here in Kilsby – as in the UK at large – we are faced with uncertainty and a time of change. I hope we will find a way to revitalise our village and prevent it from becoming just another faceless dormitory suburb. An action group is now working with the Parish Council to find a way to re-establish shop and post-office functions to meet our ongoing needs – more of this elsewhere in this issue – but every reader of this magazine can help, by ensuring that such services are strongly supported as and when they reappear.

Gren Hatton, July 2016