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Fore Street In The Early Twentieth Century

I am often told, "You must have seen some changes?" Yes ! have, the main ones being the almost complete disappearance of family businesses and the emergence of the Building Society and the Estate Agent. Let me take you up one side of Fore Street and down the other — the Fore Street of years ago.

Starting from "Big Lamp": this was four iron legs about 30ft high and on top, a large bulls-eye lantern to guide the fisher fleet of some 25 drifters, home at night.

On my left the London and South-Western Bank, with its terracotta walls and wrought iron gate. This bank was later absorbed by Barclays. Next door, the Penny Bazaar (not an early Woolworth's) — here they sold cheap mementos of a visit to the seaside, and their slogan was 'nothing over 6d.'

Across Kings Lane was Trump's Cafe. Edwin Gove Trump must have been Sidmouth's keenest business man. He saw the need for a restaurant near the sea-front and altered that large building to contain a sweet-shop on the ground floor, (Suchard, Kunzle, Rowntree, Callard & Bowser and Nestlé's were confectioners whose names spring to mind). He had a well-appointed restaurant on the first and second floors; and at the back the Winter Garden, which was a small hall with a glass roof. Trellis around the wall carried artificial flowers and creepers. The size was just right for people who did not want the larger Manor Hall for parties, meetings, the U.D.C. (*Urban District Council*) Annual Dinner and so on.

Next door was the Dove Inn and landlord 'Nimmy' Prideaux, who carried on into his eighties; as did his son Gus. Nimmy was reputed to have the best cider in town.

My father rented Western Fields and Cotlands for grazing cattle, and in alternate years he made hay for our horses. When the word got around that Fred Whitton had cut his grass, half Sidmouth turned out to help! Huge firkins of cider continuously passed from the Dove to the field. Surely the most expensive hay made in the U.K!

Over Dove Lane to 'Gent' Yeo's "snobby" shop. 'Gent was a boot and shoe repairer who also made marvellous feather boats. A feather boat was a piece of wood about 16 inches long by 3 inches wide, tapered at each end. A piece of tin formed a keel, and into holes in the deck were put feathers. We sailed these boats on the pond at the mouth of the river.

On October 21st, 1916 a cargo steamer, the "Grindon Hall", in a terrific gale, was wrecked on Salcombe Beach. The crew were able to get to the East bank of the River Sid, which was coming down in full spate. E. Bonner and 'Gent' Yeo somehow got a line across. The men were rescued, given rum and wrapped in blankets and little Yeo was awarded the Royal Humane Society Medal.

'Toff' and Mrs Mortimore's newsagent and stationery shop came next. 'Toff' was the town crier for 30 years. He also fired maroons from the Esplanade to summon the Fire Brigade and then hurried back to the Market Place to light the fire under the fire-engine boiler to get up steam to work the pumps. 'Toff' and Mrs. Mortimore founded a remarkable Sidmouth family. Their descendants include Mortimores, Dunfords, O'Briens, Goodings, and Turners, whose present-day (1986) interest in Rugby, Town Band, Youth work and Local Government is well-known.

Up the road was the London Hotel, proprietors Bert and Mrs. Goodwin. It was a very comfortable hotel (formerly Sidmouth's old Coaching Inn), mainly patronised by commercial travellers. It had a large assembly room on the first floor, very much used during our Georgian Years. Bert had been on the stage and was in great demand as a singer of comic songs. He also loved cricket, but when batting he had only one shot - he whirled his bat around in a complete circle and if he connected - Six!

Septimus Barratt's bookshop and Colwill's Florists and greengrocery shops, stood next before coming to Trump's Stores. Trump's, the Fortnum & Masons' of the West, and rightly so, was a lovely shop. All around the walls was polished mahogany with slender pillars supporting shelves, and at intervals a shield with the Sidmouth emblem. A row of chairs stood in front of the counter where the customer sat and discussed his or her requirements. The order completed and the money tendered, both **were put into a wooden** cup and attached to an overhead wire; by means of elastic this was despatched to a central desk, and the change and receipt were returned in the same way. Trumps roasted their own coffee and blended their own tea. An extremely well-stocked wine and spirits department completed a first-class store. Gove Trump expanded the business to branches at Seaton. Beer, Axminster and Ottery and had a small fleet of six motor delivery vans, Model T Fords.

Half-way up Trump's and Cross Lane was the Cosmopolitan Inn with Off and On licence, and on the other side of the lane, Alan Uglow, Jeweller and Clockmaker. Alan maintained and wound the old Parish Church clock.

Then came Field' 's Gentlemen's Outfitters with suits made to measure or off the peg, and everything from socks to silk hats. Next was Bill Lake, Corn Chandler and Seedsman. Bill supplied the farmers for miles around, the poultry keepers with their Indian corn and the cage bird fanciers with bird seed. All around the shop were huge wooden bins into which Bill would dive with a big tin scoop and emerge with what was wanted. He was a keen horseman and with Walter Martin (Sr.), also mounted, would lead the Carnival Procession every year.

Then came Hawkins, Men's Tailors, with bolts of cloth all around on the counter, and fat little Mr. Hawkins standing by with tape measure at the ready. The proprietor of the Commercial Inn next door was 'John John' Ebdon. There was no mistaking when he was around — you could hear him! On fine days he would stand at his door and tell passers-by how lovely it was and to listen to the beautiful birds. His clients were commercial travellers. Reggie Russell's China & Glass Warehouse, a large shop on two floors, also took in what is now Yendell's. He supplied the Victoria and Fortfield Hotels and had a good business. He was also a fine all-round sportsman, playing golf and cricket for the County, and his son Clifford also played County Cricket. Reggie was my godfather. I was told that when I decided to enter this world, Reggie cycled all over Sidmouth looking for Dr. Bingley Pullen, but when the doctor arrived I had beaten him by a short head.

Next door Harry Sellek, Painter and Decorator, sold artists' sundries. He employed about six men in the business and supplied Winsor & Newton's products to our artists. He was a pillar of the Congregational Church and was affectionately known as 'Parson' Sellek. When he returned to a house in Winslade Road, I went to a party there and saw my first wireless set. When it was switched on, and a voice said "We are now going over to the Savoy Hotel for dance music. I could hardly believe it.

Last on the West side of Fore Street came "The Grapes" Inn, a small office, and a large well-equipped grocers, Veale's Stores. T.B. Veale bought this business in 1900 when Coulson Bros went bankrupt. "The Grapes" soon became popular as the tradesmen's pub, especially for "elevenses". The shop was inviting, with chairs for the customers, and all along the counter biscuit tins with glass tops. You had your biscuits weighed and put in bags, not impenetrable cellophane. Tea, coffee and sugar were all packed by the assistants into parcels tied with thin string. At the bacon counter slices were cut to your required thickness. There were wines and spirits, and a large showcase full of chocolates at the back of the shop. T.B. Veale specialised in mature Cheddar cheese. He would buy 1 - 20 huge cheeses, and store them in the upper store where they had to be turned at regular intervals until ready. He also had a rare privilege: he bottled his own Guinness! A cask would arrive from Dublin and be lowered into the cellar; then two of the men would spend days bottling and labelling Harp Guinness. An unannounced agent of the firm would drop in and woe betide if all was not well. In the '30's I married TB's daughter.

Right across on the other side was Harry Russell, Baker and Confectioner. Russell Street is named after this very old Sidmouth family, who built the present red brick building. Here we bought our penny buns, jam tarts and bread. Harry was a keen musician. He formed the very popular Excelsior Band in which my father played the clarinet.

Harry did not do well and emigrated to America, the business being taken over by Jimmy Hoskins, a cousin of the well-known Devon & Exeter historian. Jimmy's hobby was conjuring. He gave shows on carnival days - generally successful, but sometimes reminiscent of the late Tommy Cooper.

Then came Jesse Farrant, Saddler & Harnessmaker. He made a complete set of harness for a London Exhibition and won a gold medal. He had three sons. Charlie, the eldest, served with the Territorials in India and Mesopotamia. Sidney was killed in France. Norman was my age and we were great friends, bowling our hoops, spinning our tops and playing marbles together. Jesse was Captain of the Parish Church bell-ringers.

Whitton & Son, Family Butchers, came next. My grandfather John started the business in 1863. He was a butcher and tenant farmer of Boughmore, just south of Bickwell Valley. I have two fine silver tankards he won for the cleanest and best cultivated farm in the valley. He lost the farm when the golf course was extended; it is now the first five and last four holes. Father took on the shop about 1900. It was known as the "Fore Street Music Hall", for indeed we were a musical family — Dad baritone and brother Fred piano. Modestly, I suppose I inherited father's baritone later on. There were two big show days in the meat trade; Easter & Christmas. At Easter, in the front would be a line of 15 lamb carcasses, all with the woolly skin on them. At Christmas there were half-a-dozen quarters of Devon beef, and at the back of the shop a barrel of cider and an couple of bottles of gin for the regulars.

On Fridays when the shop was closed and we were preparing week-end joints, passers-by would hear solos and choruses from Gilbert & Sullivan, excerpts from "The Messiah" and the latest hits from the London Theatres.

Danny and Mrs. Tedbury lived and had their dairy next door. Danny had two farms on the Sid Road to keep the business well supplied. There were two daughters, Nell and Elsie, and Danny hoped for a son. Mrs T. was expecting. The day came, and my father was doing his accounts, when an excited voice came over the wall, "Fred Whitton, 'tis a boy". "Well done, Danny". Some time later the voice came over again, "Fred Whitton, I'm damned if it isn't another one!" "Congratulations Danny." The Tedbury twins had arrived.

After Claud Martin's bicycle shop and Miss Spencer's hat shop came William "Banty" Hook's fish shop. "Banty" and his 'Missus' kept "Ulverstone" lodging-house on the sea-front. "Banty" was an Urban Councillor with some strange ideas. He wanted to buy an old battleship, fill it with concrete and put it on the Chit Rocks for a breakwater. There were two sons and a daughter. The eldest son went into the colonial service and became a Chief Commissioner in one of the African countries. Jack, the younger, when old enough, took over the business. He sold delicious bloaters which he cured in a smokehouse at the back. Next door Hawkins Boot & Shoe Shop was run by tailor Hawkins's daughters. He had four, one of whom became a nurse and ended up as Matron of a London hospital. The three remaining did dressmaking for the ladies. Hinton Lake Chemist's, was the first company shop we have come to. The manager was Garnet Skinner, a Sidmouth man. The right-hand wall was entirely composed of small mahogany drawers with the name of a chemical on the front. On the left were huge decanters of coloured liquid, and large ornamental jars. Garnet married a chemist's daughter and they had two sons. Basil, who took Holy Orders, and John who was managing director of the firm now owning Hinton Lake's.

The Culverwells were stationers, newsagents, booksellers and publishers of the "*Sidmouth Herald*". "Aunt" Bessie Culverwell was in charge of the shop, which never looked very tidy. She was a deeply religious R.C., and the greetings cards reflected her taste. I remember the shop for the Collins Classics — Dickens, Thackeray, Kingsley, G.A.Henty and Capt. Marryat, all in hard covers at 7d. each (3½p). At the back in East Street (which Harvey Culverwell Sr. always called Theatre Lane), the

Printing Office adjoined. On Fridays the printing press could be heard turning out the *Herald* for Saturday. It was run by a temperamental gas engine. The paper carried nothing but Sidmouth news and affairs; it was a kindly paper.

Across East St. stood the G.P.O. (*General Post Office* — Postmaster Mr. Wright). All its transport was horse-drawn vans and bicycles. Next came Penberthy the Chemist; it was his daughter who married Garnet Skinner. Mr Loveridge, Linen Draper followed, and then Harry Russell's Cafe serving light meals, tea and coffee and penny ices. The ices were between two wafers or in a cornet of real biscuit, not the inedible cardboard one gets today. Sam Mortimore, another "snobby," had a footwear shop and repairs in a room at the rear.

Tommy Hoselock's Tobacconist & Hairdressing Saloon came next. He sold to Arthur "Bloomer" Irish, a great character, who was a successful business man and property developer. He played the viola, but his great interest was the formation of a St. John Ambulance Brigade. He then set his sights on a motor ambulance and got that too.. He was a very good first-aider, particularly at putting back dislocated joints. He almost had a surgery in Fore Street and being trainer & Medical Officer to the Rugby Club, kept him fully occupied. He had two sons, Cyril and Frank. Frank was a very fine cricketer and for a time played for Somerset. Next door, Jack Power, tobacconist; then Lake's Livery Stables Booking Office, where you ordered your cab to go to the Station or booked a fleet of wagonettes to take your society or Sunday School for their annual outing. Frisby, the second company shop was on the corner. Towards the end of the last century the Coffee Tavern was founded by the T.T. section of our community. At the time I m writing about it was commercially run by Mr. & Mrs. Bill Skinner. Bill was employed by the S.U.D.C (*Sidmouth Urban District Council*) to collect market tolls and hawkers' fees. In earlier years he had been a fine rugby footballer and referee. Around the corner we come to Treby Earle, a ladies' shop belonging to a Miss Dean, member of a well-known Sidmouth family. Adjoining this was our very first cinema. Previously films had been shown by Arthur Ellis at the Manor Hall and Drill Hall. Now we had the real thing with a well-designed front by R.W.Sampson, and tip-up seats inside, on a raked floor. Here we saw all the great silent films: "Birth of a Nation", "Intolerance", "The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse", etc. I remember when we had "The Miracle", with Lady Diana Manners as the Nun. The entire Church Choir was behind the scenes singing suitable hymns. Arthur Ellis was a great one for original publicity. Bert Boss & C.C.Ellis Junr, were projectionists. Mr. & Mrs Ralph Earland were at the cash desk, and out in front was Dick Channon, the Commissionaire, resplendent in uniform. If a Scottish film was on, say, "Coming, Thru the Rye," or "Annie Lawrie", Dick would appear in full Highland rig, with kilt and sporran, plaid and bonnet. But with "Quo Vadis", a film of Ancient Rome, there was Dick as a Centurion — with breastplate., spear and crested helmet!

When the genius of Chaplin burst onto the scene we had all those early comedies. The serial films lasting 15 weeks ensured our regular attendance. Across the entrance to the London Inn yard was Jim Burgoyne's butchers shop. Jim emigrated and Selley brothers, Stanley & Fred, took over a good business. In those pre-fridge days, butchers had large ice boxes containing huge blocks of ice supplied by the Knowle Hotel Ice Works. Then Stan Selley put an ice-making plant in the London Yard and did very well.

Tommy Rodd, Gentlemen's Outfitter, comes next. Tommy -was our Urban Councillor and played his part in most of the twin's activities. He was responsible for the first clubhouse and dressing rooms at the Rugby ground. Next "Punky" Downs Booking Office on the corner of York Street for cabs, and later taxis. Finally we come to the Royal York Hotel, where the Prince of Wales, soon to be Edward VII, stayed at the turn of the century.

So we are back at "Big Lamp" and the end of my nostalgic walk up and down Fore Street.

E.E. Whitton, Oct. 23rd 1986.