



Margaret Ruddy and 25 years at Helpston Post Office by Joan Hancock

Margaret began work at the shop in Helpston in July 1962, after working for 10 years in Peterborough. She had been employed at Hoyles dress shop in Westage, first in the shop and later in the office. There she had started by earning £1 7s 4d a week, but by the time she left she taking home £8 10s. She remembers her first wage packet at Helpston being £6 (after tax), for a full time week including Saturdays until 5.30! The shop was owned by Captain and Mrs. Cunnell. Mr. Cunnell had retired from the army. Mrs. Cunnell had been a nurse.

In those days it wasn't a self service shop, so more staff were needed to keep it going. Mr. Cunnell was sub-postmaster and Mrs. Cunnell ran the shop. As well as Margaret working full time, there was Mrs. May Bickers. Two children came after school to fill the shelves and Mrs. Cunnell's son delivered orders on his trade bicycle, with a big basket on the front. The shop was much the same size as it is today, but the shelving units were not there. Around the walls were narrow wooden shelves, which didn't hold many things, so they had to be filled up quiet often. There was a long counter running from the front to the back of the shop, in front of where the marble topped fridge stands now (used to stand!). This is where customers would come and ask for their groceries. Purchases were collected on the counter and the bill added up on paper. The till was one that just recorded the total. The keys had to be held down to open the drawer.

Behind the counter was a wall lined with shelves, with a door leading to an anteroom, where the cheeses were kept on a counter, and the bacon slicing machine stood. Behind that, where the eggs are kept today, was a stockroom, from which the shelves were replenished throughout the day. In the middle of the shop floor was a long freezer, and shelves went right round the walls where the Post Office now is. The Post Office counter was then to the right of the shop door as you go in. There was no need for a glass protective screen the; in fact security was much less of a problem. In the Cunnell's time there was only one break-in, and then just an empty till was stolen. Nowadays we are more aware of the dangers – in fact there was a robbery a few years ago. Amounts of money passing to and fro were of course much less. Next to the old Post Office counter was where the sweets were kept. The wall facing you as you enter the shop was stocked with jars of sweets, with a counter in front where they were weighed out. There was also a glass case fro the chocolate bars; people were handed what they asked for.

Most groceries were sold pre-wrapped 25 years ago at the shop. However, currants, sultanas, raisins and dried fruit salad were sold out of 28 lb boxes and weighed up into waxed paper bags. As far as Margaret remembers, the Cunnells didn't sell bread, though Lyons cakes were delivered. A wide variety of cheeses were sold. These came as whole rounds to be cut up. The cheddars were so large that they had to be skinned, and then sliced across horizontally before they could be cut up to sell. In those days, the shop was part of the VG group, and they used occasionally to deliver half a pig, for Mrs. Cunnell to prepare. It was ready cured, so she would first of all bone it and then cuts of bacon would be prepared. Their own ham was prepared – first the meat was squeezed into a ham press, then boiled in the old ham boiler, and sliced up to sell. Other sorts of cooked meat came canned, ready to slice.

A very wide range of goods was sold in the shop, from hardware to Wellingtons, children's underwear to wools and haberdashery. The little storeroom on the other side of the gates used to be an annexe to the shop, where customers could go to choose crockery, bowls, brushes and so on. Wellingtons were hung in rows on the wall according to size, and the windows held displays.

Before the Cunnells retired in 1968, the shop had been changed to a self-service store, and the present shelving units installed. The Andersons who bought the shop from the Cunnells, made further alterations to make the shop bigger, putting in two steel girders to open up a large shop area. Then the whole of the ground floor of the house was shop or storeroom and hardware goods were brought in from the storeroom across the yard. They also opened the Fish and Chip Shop. The shop has gradually decreased in size while Mr. and Mrs. Pocklington have been at the shop, and it is now much as it was 25 years ago.

Over the years Margaret's position has increased in responsibility, from just serving in the shop and preparing the shelves and the stock, to being invaluable to its smooth running, with the ordering of stock, and the ability to find whatever a customer needs if it is possible. Coming to the Village Shop these days may be different in some ways from 25 years ago, but it retains some of its charm, especially the personal attention and consideration given to customers, something which hasn't changed in all these years.

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