

HERITAGE CIRCLE

Linda Sexton, A Short History of Shopping

Linda Sexton provided an overview of the evolution of shopping from earliest times to modern day when she gave a talk to the September meeting of the Heritage Circle at Rickinghall Village Hall.

Linda thinks that people have always had to shop. She mentioned the use of coins by the Iceni and the Trinovantes from about 10BC. These two Celtic tribes living in East Anglia appear to have engaged in trade. An early Suffolk market was established on Cornhill in Ipswich from the 7th Century AD because this was higher ground above a navigable river. Initially, there would have been no buildings but gradually craftsmen would have built workshops around the market and a town would have begun to develop. By the time the Domesday Book was completed in 1086 there were several markets in Suffolk, including Eye and Bury St Edmunds.

An early shop may be found in Lavenham, next to the Guild Hall. It would have had no glass in the windows, only shutters. One was above the window to offer protection from the weather to customers and another below the window which could have acted as a counter. The interior of the shop would probably have had a workshop and a kitchen downstairs with the family's bedroom upstairs.

Medieval streets tended to be narrow. An example is Dial Lane in Ipswich where the modern shops opposite the former St Lawrence Church stand on the medieval building line. It was originally called Cooks Row as the bakers had shops here. Early markets often had narrow entrances which allowed the town authorities to tax those entering the market. This led to an illegal practice known as 'forestalling' where farmers were encouraged to sell their produce before entering the market place.

There were significant changes to shopping during the 18th and 19th Centuries. The architect, John Wood, redesigned parts of Bath. His shops had a distinctive design. They were constructed with bricks and had windows with panes of glass about 12" square. Shop signs were hung from brackets and the name of the shopkeeper was displayed, rather than a picture of the goods, as there was an increasingly literate population. Inside the shop there were oil lamps rather than noxious tallow candles. This allowed the shops to be open in the evening. This design was copied by other towns where the timber framed shops were given a new façade.

By the 19th Century, corner shops began to appear in many industrial towns. These often began as places where products like tea were sold to workers from front rooms in the evening. They gradually extended the range of foods available. Village shops started at a similar time to offer a variety of goods, such as soap, sweets, dry goods and paraffin. Further developments at this time were gas lighting which came to Ipswich in 1821 and the invention of plate glass by the 1870s which allowed bigger displays of merchandise. Similarly, shop names were moved to the front of buildings, replacing overhanging signs.

During the middle and late 19th Century, many well-known high street shops opened, including the Co-op in 1844, Sainsbury's in 1869, and Marks and Spencer formed in 1884. One of the most influential retailers was Harry Selfridge, an American, who opened his London store in 1909. The size of the shop allowed customers to browse. There was also a restaurant and toilets which allowed women to come to London for the day to meet friends and to shop at leisure. In the same year, another American, Frank Woolworth, offered cheap goods to working people in Liverpool because he paid cash for bulk purchases of manufactured goods.

The internet and shopping malls are now a further stage in the continuing evolution of shopping.

The next meeting of the Heritage Circle will be at 7.30pm on Wednesday 26 October at The Village Hall, Rickinghall. Geoffrey Robinson will be talking about the History of Suffolk Place Names. Further information about the Heritage Circle is available on its website, www.heritagecircle.onesuffolk.net.

Gerry Gurhy