

LONDON BOUND (Circa 1937)

Jake was settled in his carriage seat on his way to his first job. He had been offered an apprenticeship for three years in a North London emporium. His department for work was Household Goods and China and he would work from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. on Monday to Wednesday with a half-day on Thursday shutting at 1 p.m. On Friday he would finish at 8 p.m. and on Saturday, the busiest day by far, at 9 p.m.

The journey was varied as the fields and arable land started to give way to the urban sprawl and before he knew it he had arrived at King's Cross station.

He was not prepared for the hustle and bustle of the station and after a few enquiries he was given directions to his new workplace and he duly arrived to be interviewed again by the head of the Hardware Section and then given a duster and told to dust down the shelves of saucepans, kettles and assorted china objects, and so his day began.

The store had apartments at the back of the shop so lodging was arranged and meals in the staff canteen and in this fashion his three years in London began.

The store also carried under the label of hardware items such as mangles, washing machines, cycles and as a complete switch, livestock. This consisted of green pairs and blue pairs of budgerigars. The green pairs cost 12/6 and the blue pairs 15/-. There was also a small pen holding many tortoises of different ages. These were all slow moving items to sell. Each tortoise had its price chalked on its back and if a tortoise didn't move for a week it was presumed to be dead and disposed of. This line of stock didn't last very long.

Other duties soon followed, such as helping to window-dress the store front and write sales tickets. One or two old store jokes were played; being sent to another department for a window enlarger or an issue of red oil for the cycle rear lamps and then, perhaps in very busy times one was allowed to serve a customer only after a rather strict procedure had been observed; the first hand should already be serving and the second hand depending on how many assistants in the department and so on down to the apprentice.

The days and months passed and Jake progressed up the ladder of store promotion and wage structure, commission being paid on sales accounted for at a rate of 3p in the pound but, if one served out of turn and the more senior assistant noticed, you would be asked to credit the sale in favour of the senior assistant thus protecting the commission basis. One other thing "The customer is always right." Many other jobs were undertaken; unpacking crates of china items many of which came from China itself, setting up tea and dinner sets and other sales items when the occasion arose.

One incident arose which is worth a mention. In the store there was also a lending library. One day a customer, on choosing a book pulled out the book of her choice only to be followed by a white plume of smoke. She tried another book and the same thing happened. Someone investigated and issued a fire warning. The paper shed at the back of the store was on fire. The fire extinguisher soon dealt with it resulting in some stock damaged by water. Hence, a sale later on of fire damaged goods.

Another time, a flood of water during a demonstration of washing machines, which a quick thinking demonstrator used to his advantage using a sales tool called Straight Jane and this mopped up the floor and increased the sales of Straight Jane an earlier version of the mops we use today.

By this time it was 1939, war had been declared, and Jake, being at work during the day and air raid precautions at night was fully engaged until conscription called in 1941 and the Army had other skills for him to learn.