

# Village Shops and Services

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

Commercially, the village until at least the end of the 1950s was still quite self-contained. It lacked a natural commercial centre but scattered around the parish there was a post office, four general stores, three butchers, two bakers, two cobblers, a saddler, two men's barbershops, two sweet shops, and a wool shop.

There were three carpenters, two of which also provided an undertaking service. Two people delivered newspapers, Arthur Pattemore (also known as Arthur Hut - an example of the nick-name culture) on weekdays by pony and trap that I often used to ride in, and Frankie Langdon and his wife Rose, using heavily laden bicycles, on Sundays.



Arthur Pattemore with his pony and trap, plus assorted dogs and two village boys (not me on this occasion) enjoying the ride

Arthur Pattemore was a Merriott man through and through and was one of the last people to speak using the unique combination of local accent and dialogue. Fortunately, in 1956 his voice was recorded. If you would like to hear it, go to this website <http://sounds.bl.uk> Enter Merriott as the search word and you should access the recording

By the early-1950s, there was a fish and chip shop run by Mrs Pattemore in Church Street, almost opposite the King's Head. I believe the shop building is still there. There was great excitement amongst the younger people when that first opened and, for a while, it was here in the evenings that we tended to congregate.

There were two small garages-cum-filling stations. One of the garages, known as Shutler's, was near where the present Broadway Filling Station is today. This was a galvanized iron building, painted green, with wide doors facing the roadway. It was commandeered as a workshop by the American military when they arrived in the village in 1943 and was demolished soon after the war. The other was Arthur Miller's down at Merriottsford where the taxi hire firm is today. But there were not many cars about. When I was quite a small, I remember sitting on our cottage steps collecting car numbers but the list was never very long. A strange car appearing was quite an exciting occurrence.



Arthur Milers garage at a slightly later date, after new petrol pumps had been installed

I was once quite familiar with Arthur Miller's business which at that time included a two-pump petrol filling station, vehicle servicing, cycle repairs, making and repairing horse harness and other leather goods, and battery charging, the latter including glass-cased acid-filled accumulators used to power radios. Arthur also sold bicycles, cycle spares and accessories such as tyres, inner tubes, puncture repair kits, cycle lamps, torch bulbs and batteries, and so on and, of course, the leather goods he made. I once bought a single-pocket leather purse for one shilling and a school satchel for one pound.



Wireless accumulator

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One of my regular after-school chores was to take one of the accumulators we used to power our Cossor radio down to Miller's to get it recharged. When charged it would provide power for about a week. Like most people, we had two accumulators so that when one was in use the other could be down Miller's. A re-charge cost 6d (2.5p).

One of my very earliest shopping memories is of getting my haircut in George Sprake's barbershop down at Knapp.

I remember having to sit quiet as a mouse, waiting my turn in the chair. I have a feeling small boys needing haircuts were automatically relegated to the back of the queue because sometimes it was a very long wait whilst George dealt with a seemingly never-ending procession of men waiting to be shaved. When that was the case, all you could do was amuse yourself by watching the reflections of lather-covered faces in the big mirror.



I remember how George lathered a man's face with little circular movements of his shaving brush until the occupant looked like Father Christmas with a whiter-than-white beard, a sight that was only marred when a previously tightly-closed mouth opened to reveal yellowing teeth, their colour emphasised by the whiteness of the shaving soap.

Next, there was the razor-sharpening ritual. The razor George used was an open 'cut-throat'. To sharpen it he used a narrow strip of leather hanging on the back of the chair in which the customer nonchalantly reclined. *Slap! Slap! Slap!* the razor went, backwards and forwards, backwards and forwards, each stroke necessitating a deft flick of the wrist, the action continuing until George was

satisfied that the edge was sufficiently keen. Then he would start shaving, scraping first this way, then the other, tilting the head to the left for a few strokes, then right, then nose well up in the air so that he could get at the underside of the chin. And as the razor became loaded, he scrapped the soap onto a small square of newspaper resting on the customer's chest.

When all the shaving was done, George turned his hand to haircuts for small boys. *'Come on then, son,'* he would command, and up you got at last. Very small boys had to sit on a plank resting on the chair arms and it was something of a milestone in your life when you were considered sufficiently grown up to sit down properly in the chair. Cocooned in a flowing white sheet, there you sat, gazing at your reflection in the mirror as George began proceedings with an exploratory combing.

From years of experience, George knew precisely what was expected of him; haircut money was hard to come by so parents required that visits be kept to a minimum. (Indeed, money was scarce enough for my father often to send me down George Sprake's for just *one* 'three-holed' razor blade so that he could give himself a Saturday shave; he probably couldn't afford a shop shave.) So, George didn't exactly spare the hand-operated clippers.

His one and only style was a very, very short back and sides that left the back of your head as stubbled as a nailbrush. But the best bit of all was when he downed his clippers and said *'Shut your eyes, son,'* and then, using a large square bottle with a squeeze bulb attached, sprayed 'scent' all over the little bit of smartly-parted hair





he had spared. If I close my eyes and concentrate I think I can still smell that scent, mingled with the smell of shaving soap, smoke from ever-smouldering Woodbines and fumes from the Valor oil stove that engulfed the shop.

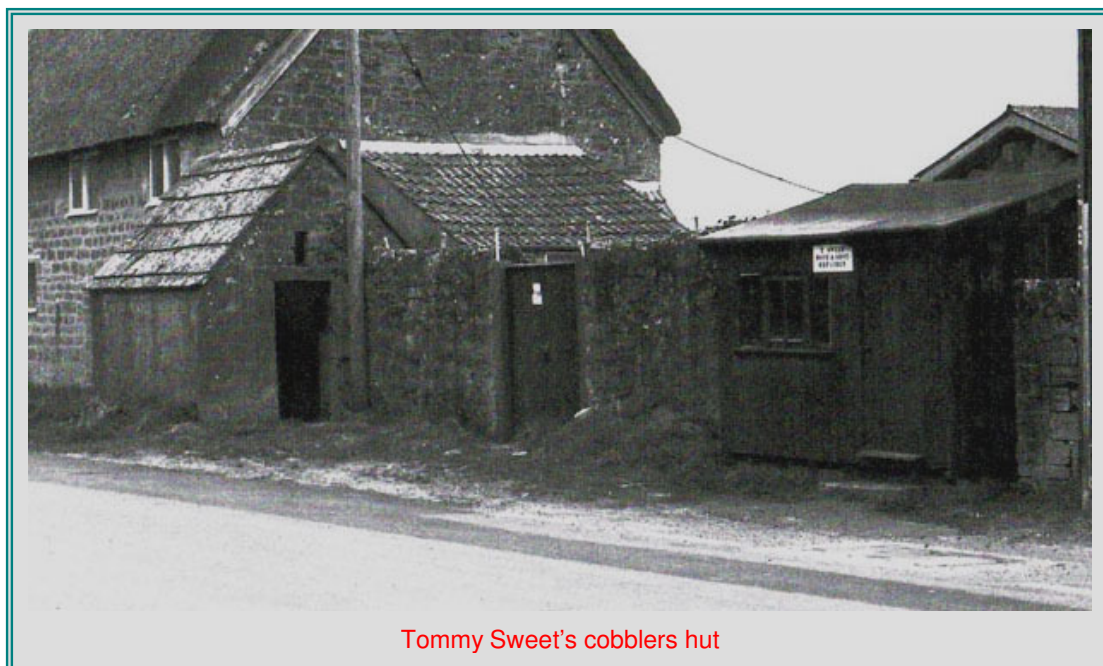
I have another memory of George Sprake. Outside his shop, mounted on the angular wall leading to Hitchen steps, he had a Wrigley's chewing gum vending machine. Insert a penny, open the drawer, and there would be a small packet of six sugarcoated spearmint gum tablets. One day a small group of us had the idea of tricking George into parting with some chewing gum because, we declared, the machine failed to work when we put a penny in. George came out to the machine and checked that it had stock and that it wasn't jammed. Then he popped a succession of pennies into the machine and, without fail, it worked perfectly. Whoever was our spokesperson that day - it wasn't me - again insisted a penny had been inserted and no chewing gum was forthcoming. George, kindly chapel man that he was, thought about things for a while but eventually gave us a packet of chewing gum. He also gave us a look that suggested he knew damn well what we were up to and we had better not try the same trick again. Nor did we.

At that time, George Sprake's was one of two barbershops in the village. The second was in Lower Street, in a hut at the bottom of Half Acre Lane, now rather grandly called Shyner's Terrace. (Such was the local pronunciation of Half Acre Lane that for years I thought it was Africa Lane.) The hut was divided into two rooms; to the left of the door was the waiting room and to the right was where the barber had his chair. During the war years, the barber was a Mr Smith, a Londoner who, together with his family, came to live in the village soon after the outbreak of hostilities. Immediately after the war, a couple of burglars broke into the hut and, using matches to find their way around, managed to set fire to the place and it was burnt to the ground. Shortly after, the Smith family, who lived in a cottage in Tail Mill Lane, left the village.

Immediately opposite the barber's hut was Charlie Osborne's cobblers shop. The shop was very small. It stank of leather. Boots and shoes were stacked in every conceivable place, including on the counter immediately inside the door where they were so high that a small boy often had difficulty in seeing over them. Charlie's bench was immediately in front of the window and to the side of the bench was his finishing machine, a motor-driven shaft on which was mounted a range of sanding wheels and buffers. Thanks to this machine, everywhere and everything in the shop, including Charlie, was covered in dust.

Charlie's shop was something of a magnet for the boys and young men of the village, principally because of Charlie's interest and involvement in village football but also because this was where the latest in jokes, especially 'dirty' ones, were to be heard. It was here too, on occasions, when things got slightly more bawdy, that many a young upstart of a lad was forced to endure having his trousers pulled down and his private parts smothered in boot blacking. I managed to escape this humiliation.

There was another cobbler, Tommy Sweet, who worked in a hut at the top of Tail Mill Lane. His door was usually wide open and the *tap, tap, tap* of his hammer could



clearly be heard over a wide area of that part of the village. There would often be no other sound except perhaps the distant ring from the village blacksmith's anvil, such was the peace and quiet of those times, quite unimaginable now.

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There were three grocer shops in the village: the Co-op (also generally referred to simply as 'stores') down Knapp, Hamlin's in Lower Street, and Billy Holman's up at Bake House Corner. Only one of these shops, the Co-op, survives, albeit under a different name.

I had little or no experience of shopping down Hamlin's or up Holman's because food rationing during the war years required each individual had to be registered at one particular shop. Of the seven people in our family, five were registered in Nichols and Gee in Crewkerne and two down at the Co-op. Miss Mildred Paull, who lived in the village and worked for Nichols and Gee, called on my mother every Monday evening and took her order for the week. The goods were delivered the

following Thursday afternoon, free of charge.

The rations from the Co-op were collected on Tuesday and it was my after-school job to get them. I hated this chore. The shop was invariably crowded, because on

Tuesday afternoons trays of cakes and meat pasties were delivered from Crewkerne



and, since they were not rationed, there was a bit of a scramble to get hold of them. My standing instructions were to get seven pasties and seven jam tarts.

As you entered the shop, to the left was the fats and bacon counter. A Berkel bacon slicer, with a graphic display of possible thicknesses, was right next to the window. Just one man, Mr Hawker, clad in a white apron, manned this counter. I have no idea what the rations for two people amounted to, but it was at this counter you handed over your ration books and coupons were cut or the allowances indicated on specific pages cancelled out. Then, small amounts of margarine, lard and cheese were cut, weighed, and individually wrapped in greaseproof paper on which the price was scribbled. The cheese was supplied to the shop in large, round, linen-wrapped 'cheeses', initially too large to cut using a knife and so they were sectioned by drawing a wire through them. Even the smaller pieces of cheese were 'cut' using a wire, never a knife. Lard and margarine were also supplied to the shop in large blocks but these were cut with a large knife, not a wire.

Facing the door was an unmanned counter on which there was a row of biscuit tins, tilted forward and with their lids removed to display their contents of Peake Frean, Huntley and Palmer, Crawford's or Jacob's biscuits. Below the biscuits were locally-grown vegetables - carrots, broad beans, runner beans, two or three Savoy cabbages



perhaps, or a basket of cauliflower. And, in season, fruit - apples, pears, damsons and Victoria plums - also grown in the village.

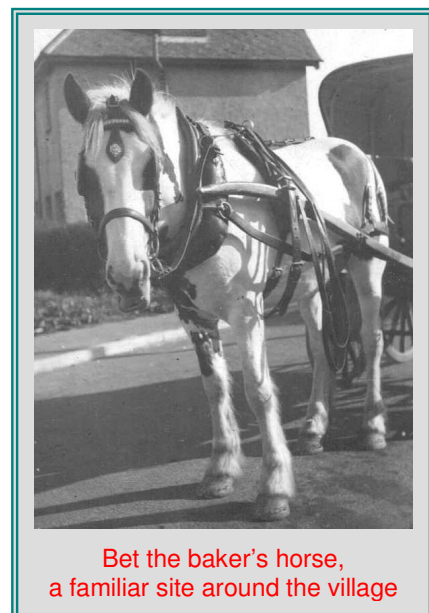
To the right of the door there was another counter at which you bought everything else you needed or could get other than the bacon and fats. There were three or four assistants jostling for space at this counter, amongst them the shop manager, Frank Strickland. When space became available, you moved forward and placed all your little packages of fat, cheese and bacon on the counter. '*And the next, please,*' Mr Strickland would say and then trot off to get the individual pot of meat paste or whatever you had asked for. This would be placed on the counter. '*And the next, please,*' he would again ask, and then trot off for the next item. When your order was complete, a hand-written bill with each item listed was made out. But the goods were not paid for until the following week. Instead, you paid the bill for the previous and when you did so you were given a 'ticket', a little numbered receipt, to which was added your share number. Our number was 36, inherited from my maternal grandmother who was the 36<sup>th</sup> person to join the Crewkerne and District Co-operative Society many years before. This ticket was eventually affixed to a gummed sheet and, at the end of the year, all the individual totals on the tickets were added together to determine the amount of dividend to which you were entitled.

There were two butchers in the village, Charlie Osborne and Frank Parker, both in Lower Street. We had a delivery of meat from Frank Parker every Friday afternoon. He had a green van and in diagonal lettering across the rear doors it boldly stated '*Best English Meat Only*'. Most of this, I believe, was locally reared and killed on the premises. On Thursday mornings before school, I had to go down to Parker's yard - there wasn't a shop as such, just an outbuilding in the yard - and collect a quantity of liver, sausages or faggots, depending on availability.

Just before the war there were two bakers, Harry Mitchell, my uncle, whose bakery and shop were down Knapp close by the Co-op, and Mr Foard whose bakery was at the top of Tail Mill Lane.

Harry Mitchell was renowned for the quality of his Easter cakes, both locally and further afield. When he died in 1939, the bakery business came to an end but his wife, my Aunt Annie, continued to sell sweets at the shop right through the war years and it was here that I bought my quarter-pound ration every Saturday. I don't remember Mr Foard too well and know nothing of his baking skills other than the currant population of his buns was generally agreed to be somewhat sparse. One sarcastic comment I recall someone making is that he stood on Ham Hill when he was sprinkling the currants in the mix. Ham Hill is four or five miles away.

Sometime in the early 1940s, the bakery changed hands and the new baker was a Mr Batstone. It



was then called '*The Laurel Bakery*' but the village people still referred to it simply as '*down bake house*'. Like the butcher, there was no shop as such. Customers went via a garden path off Tail Mill Lane into the bake house itself to buy their bread and cakes. The oven was immediately inside the entrance door and, on occasions, you had to wait outside as bread was taken from the oven on long-handled wooden 'spades' and tipped onto a table. The site of those golden loaves, and the smell, was wonderful and I never minded waiting. Later, when I was about twelve or thirteen, I remember helping to lift off and stack the hot tins, wearing a pair of hessian yeast bags as gloves.

Much of the output from the bakery was delivered straight to the customer, deliveries being made around the village by horse-drawn van on Mondays, Wednesday and Fridays. The rounds man was Harry Elswood. The more privileged customers also got a delivery on Saturday mornings via carrier bike. As young boys, both my brother Jack and I had the job of providing this service at one time or another.

Bread was baked every day except Sundays. On Sundays, people were able to get their Sunday joints and potatoes baked in the bread oven. It was a very useful service, especially for people who lacked baking facilities in their own home. Customers delivered their dishes about half past nine in the morning and collected them again around mid-day, after coming out of church or chapel in many cases. The hot dishes were carried in slings fashioned from tea cloths. The price charged for this service during the war was just 4d.

Just as there was no baker shop, neither was there a dairy although dairy produce could be purchased from several farms. In addition, several dairy farmers delivered milk door-to-door twice a day, morning and afternoon, virtually straight from the cow. Pony and trap was a common method of delivery, although I recall one lady, Mrs Wills, pushed a bicycle around, the pails containing the milk hanging on the handlebars. Our own milkman, Frank Paull, at one time carried his churns and pails on the drop-down boot lid of his Austin car. Whatever the mode of transport, the milk was dipped from the pails using pint- and half-pint measures and then poured into the housewives' jugs that they placed on the doorstep in readiness. At this time, milk was not pasteurised and therefore, far from being the health-promoting drink it was widely considered to be, it posed a considerable health risk. That said, I do not recall any member of our family or anyone else becoming ill as a result of drinking it.

There was a village fishmonger, Will Raiment; he didn't have a shop but he delivered fresh fish using a motorcycle and sidecar. Another fishmonger from Crewkerne, Stan Wooten, called regularly. In addition to this, during the summer months of May and June, some village hawkers, who normally sold locally produced fruit and vegetables to catering outlets or door to door in nearby towns, sold fresh mackerel around the village. This was a long-established practice going back many, many years to the days when the horse and cart was the only transport available. In those days, they collected the fish straight off the boats at West Bay some fifteen miles away and then raced each other back to the village. I have no recollection of the use of horse and cart, only motor vans and small pick-up trucks, and I think by the then the racing was at an end. But I am quite sure the cry '*Mackerel! Mackerel! West Bay*'



*mackerel!* that I regularly heard was the very same cry that had been heard by generations past. But no longer, alas.

There is one other shop that I must mention. It was half way up Broadway, at the junction with Hitchen; there is still a shop there to this day, Osborne's Broadway Stores. In my young days, it was much smaller and a formidable spinster called Maude Farr ran it, a somewhat obese lady who used to spend much of her time sitting on her front step, with Ted her collie dog at her feet, gossiping with whoever happened to be passing and critically observing the world go by. And, of course, *chucking off!* She sold a miscellany of things such as clothing, hats, linen and the like, and also cigarettes, tobacco and sweets.



Maude Farr with her beloved Ted outside her shop

My sister Marjorie, when she was about ten or eleven years old, was sent up Maude Farr's shop to buy herself a cardigan. Maude had two in stock, which my mother must have known about, a blue one and a fawn one, both with buttons down the front and with two little patch pockets. Marjorie chose the blue one because it was much prettier than the fawn one. But when she got home, mother noticed there was a hole in it so she sent Marjorie back with instructions to change it for the fawn one. Maude examined the blue one and, seeing the hole, reluctantly handed over the fawn one. But she also handed back the blue one. *'Here chil, thee bedder 'ave thic one, too,'* she said. *'Buy-one-get-one-free'*, all those years ago!

But I rarely ventured inside Maude's shop. She was far too intimidating. On one occasion, when I was about thirteen years old, I tried very hard to be friendly towards her. *'Hello, Maude,'* I called out as I pedalled by on my bike. *'Miss Farr to you, young man,'* she snapped back.



No account of the commercial life of the village in those days would be complete without reference to Mr Chedzoy who visited Merriott with his heavily laden van on Saturdays to sell household goods

and paraffin door to door. I haven't forgotten him. The service he provided and my involvement with it is the subject of another chapter.

Finally, the public houses of which there were four: The Bell, The George, The King's Head and The Swann. My knowledge of these is limited since pubs were essentially adult male dominated in those days, very few women went in them and certainly no kids like me. It was The Bell that dominated the scene down my end of the village. I can well recall the Sunday morning gathering of men at Knapp - '*cocking up*' was the way idly hanging around was described - waiting for Luke Osborne, the landlord at that time, to open the doors at exactly mid-day, whereupon they would all head off down the road for their Sunday lunch-time tipple, just as the tut-tutting Methodists, their Sunday morning service over, came along Lower Street. Other memories include seeing the occasional horse and cart being tethered to a ring in the pub wall, numerous bicycles stacked either side of the doorway, and hearing raucous singing and ribald laughter escaping through open windows on warm summer evenings. But even when I was older, I rarely ventured inside any of the pubs, choosing to conduct most of my youthful experiments with alcohol away from the village. Now, of the four pubs just two remain, The Swann and the King's Head, both, it seems, having more of a reputation as restaurants than conventional village pubs.

With all the facilities I have outlined, and no doubt some I have overlooked, it's clear the village at that time was a very self-sufficient community. But it was far from being cut off from the outside world, thanks to the local bus services provided by the Southern National Bus Company based in Yeovil and Safeway Services based in South Petherton. There were frequent, reliable services to and from Yeovil, via Crewkerne and the surrounding villages, from early morning until late at night. I once knew the bus timetables by heart; even now, I can recall most of the departure times, but not the return times, probably because they were of less importance. I think most villagers preferred catching Safeway buses rather than the Southern Nationals; the Safeways and their staff were very much part of the local community. I recall memories of two of the conductresses in a later chapter.