

# THE GAS WORKS

“I’ve got just the job for you,” Reg insisted. “I’ll just go and pinch the notice off the noticeboard.....”

It was 1953, and I wasn’t even looking for a job. I already had a perfectly good one, working in the Market Street Branch of ‘Boots the Chemist’ in Leicester. Reg was one of our regular customers, relying on ‘Boots’ to sort out his not infrequent colds and hangovers. He worked at the Gas Board Office on the corner and the job that had so attracted his attention on my behalf was for someone to work in the Gas Showroom on New Road in Kibworth.

The position, on the face of it, did seem ideal. It was very convenient, as I was newly married and living in Kibworth, and it involved dealing with customers and window dressing, which I was used to doing at Boots. On the other hand, no one thought to mention that I’d also be required to walk around a pile of coke as big as a house and estimate how much was in it. Or that I’d have to fill in a gas production sheet as big as a kitchen table, in a whole new language of incomprehensible terms such as “calorific value”, and mysterious “therms”, which was more daunting.



Kibworth’s Gas Works sat towards the bottom of New Road, on the left hand side as you walk down from the The Bank, a little before the railway bridge. The site was dominated by its massive gasometer and my showroom was at the front, with a big plate glass window and themed displays that had to be changed several times a year. Although it was quite out of the way, away from the centre of the village, I could never get away with not doing the windows as the Display Manager always came out and checked!

Competitions were run for the best showroom window dressing, always a great challenge and one year, as I remember, we even won!



We sold all manner of appliances. Cookers, obviously, but also, and perhaps more surprising nowadays, gas powered fridges. Water heaters and washing coppers. Gas poker - metal rapiers with fire emitting snouts, that were handily thrust into reluctant solid fuel fires and boilers to light them. And fragile asbestos gas mantles, for lighting.

My office was at the back of the showroom, with a big open coke fire that in winter was always lit and waiting for me when I arrived in the morning. I had a little gas ring for making tea and upstairs was the old boardroom, a relic of the old days before nationalisation (1948), when it was Kibworth Gaslight and Coke Company - it was extremely rare for a village the size of Kibworth to have set up its own gas company.

A side door led out into the yard, where Jack Dann the odd job man spent all his spare time in an open sided building cleaning up old black cast iron cookers. These were rented out to those in dire need for a nominal sum - folk who were hard up used to turn up regularly with an empty bag and a baby's pushchair (also empty) to collect and transport a solitary bag of coke, when they couldn't afford to buy the larger quantities offered for sale by any of the three village coal merchants.

Stretching all the way from the yard up to the railway embankment was the long retort house. It was always incredibly hot in there, so hot that it always reminded me of Hell and it smelt acrid and sulphurous. There were a series of retorts, which looked just like a row of small cast iron ovens with clamps to keep the doors closed, but each little circular door was actually the entrance to a long horizontal tube. For some reason the floor in front of the retorts was made of a series of cast iron plates covering over some kind of cavernous space beneath. They rattled and clanked alarmingly when you walked on them, which I found very unnerving and to this day I'm still not keen on walking on piers, or anything with a hollow gap underneath.

The retorts were heated, which turned the coal into coke and gave off gas, which was stored in the gasometer next door. This was quite a village landmark, a massive pair of sheet iron cylinders nested one inside the other, floating in a reservoir of water. The sections rose and fell strangely silently, according to the amount of gas there was inside.

Three stokers worked incredibly hard, each putting in an aching 8 hour shift to keep the retorts running twenty four hours a day, every day, including Christmas. They shovelled coal into them and shovelled red hot coke out, which was swiftly quenched with water either in the retort house or in the yard. They were always black and smudged with sweat and coal dust and often stripped to the waist. One was Cecil Stocks, who lived in Smeeton and died not long, and another was George Humphries, but sadly I don't remember the name of the third.

An everlasting supply of coal to feed the hungry retorts arrived by steam train in a coal truck. We had our own siding and George Knapp, a short powerful man who spent all of his time shovelling coal out of the truck into a large wheelbarrow, which he then manhandled down the steep railway embankment to the retort house and shovelled out again. He had lived with his brother on Weir Road, but when his brother died he came to stay at the Gas Works, in the room over the weighbridge office (we had a weighbridge for weighing the outgoing coke lorries) and his meals were sent over from the gas house.

Peter Mason was the Gas Works Manager and he lived on site in the double fronted brick built Victorian gas house, which was actually more pleasant and less industrial than it sounds as it had a large garden where he grew all his own vegetables.



He had a wife and two daughters, Mona and Megan, and a son, James. The Masons were a gas family and had been in gas long before nationalisation – one of Peter's brothers ran the Oakham gas works and another the St. Ives works in Cambridgeshire. If you were short of a stoker you would ring round and borrow one from another family member! Son James was our gas fitter and Mona ran our Showroom, but sadly died young, which was how come the position came to be advertised.

Much later, after the Gas Works had closed down, two bungalows were built on the gas house garden. First, one was built for Megan, Peter Mason's daughter, and later a second was added for Wendy, James' daughter, Peter's granddaughter. Generously, Megan, who for many years was a cook at the High School, had accommodation included in her new bungalow for George Knapp, who by this time had simply become a member of the Mason's extended gas family.

The whole of the village was on gas, although Smeeton was rather reluctant at first and only accepted it once both Kibworths had street lights. Gas even went out as far as Kibworth Hall, although there were no maps of the pipework and Jack Dann was always being called out to locate their particularly troublesome supply, one of his more unusual odd jobs, along with his daily task of knocking on the window of our apprentice gas fitter, Roland Smith, on his way to work to make sure he was up. Roland was young and like most teenagers had difficulty getting up in the morning!

Meters were read and emptied quarterly by our bicycling meter men Ken Brewin and his cousin John Lowe. They, along with their push bikes, were brought from Harborough in a Gas Van. The bikes had a special carrier for the money on the front. Some meters had to be emptied with both of them there, for various reasons – one in particular I remember was at a house where the dog **always** peed in the money bag!

Many of the people with a prepayment meters used to walk down to the showroom to get shillings to put in the slot. For credit meters, bills were sent out from Leicester but were paid in cash at our showroom. I used to walk up to the village to do the banking on Mondays and Fridays, which was when the bank came to Kibworth and temporarily took over what was firstly Wilford Coleman's front room and later Commander Pittman's, in the house right next to the railway on Station Street.

So I used to see nearly everyone in the village at least once a quarter when they came down to the showroom to pay their bill. It was a good way of getting to know people and one way and another life at the showroom turned out to be an excellent introduction to village life.

Barbara Ward  
With help from my daughter, Gill Guest