

Post Office Memories

By Doreen Butteriss (nee Bennett)

One highlight of my working life were the twenty years behind the counter at Kibworth's Post Offices. I have varied and happy memories and will now share some of them with you.

It all started one day in 1975 as I served Mrs Margaret Collis in the greengrocer's shop at 34 High Street. I'd been working at this shop for a little while and got to know local customers. She said 'Would you come and work for me?': 'Who me?' I replied. 'Yes, I'm going to take over the post office.' 'I can't do anything like that' said I. Mrs Collis went on 'Well, I haven't done this kind of thing before either. We can learn together'.

This was a dilemma for me. Our second son had died not long before and making decisions like this was difficult. Obviously, I told my present employer at the greengrocery shop that I had the chance of another job. 'Where are you going?' he enquired. 'To the post office.' 'No, you're not, you're going to stop here with me.' O dear! Mrs Collis returned for an answer and added 'I'll up your wages' which made an attractive proposition, which I eventually accepted.

Station Street Post Office

At that time Kibworth's Post Office was situated at 9 Station Street, quite close to the central roundabout (also known by some as 'The Bank' or even 'The Square'). Years before this place had been occupied by a painter and decorator, John Hind, and nowadays it is an Italian restaurant. The public post office was at the front of the building, not very large, and there was a small post sorting area at the back. The post office itself had a wooden counter and I think in the 1970s it didn't have a protective screen between the counter staff and customers. We had to stand up to work – there were no chairs or stools. And, most memorable, there was absolutely no heating. O how cold it was in winter, especially as my employer insisted on

keeping the front door open all the time to attract customers in.

I'd been working mornings only at the greengrocery shop and wanted to stay with those hours and so Mrs Collis agreed to take on another assistant in due course to work in the afternoons. We all needed training in post office duties and so, after closing time, we would go to Charles Street HQ in Leicester on a couple of evenings to learn the basics. But there was a big difference between being told what to do and actually doing it on the job. One had to learn the many varied procedures by day to day practise. It was an uphill task! Further training in Leicester was required when we took on new duties, for example vehicle taxation.

Mrs Collis lived in Saddington and travelled to and from Kibworth each day. Previously she had lived on Leicester Road in Kibworth Harcourt. She was fond of dogs and had two puppies which she brought to work in a large handbag. They stayed at the back of the post office. Mr Collis, her husband, had no part in running the post office as he had his own leather business.

The post office was open Monday to Friday from 9.00am to 1.00pm and then 2.00pm to 5.00pm; Saturday's opening was 9.00am to 12.30pm. Of course the postmen arrive much earlier in the mornings to sort incoming letter and parcels. Mostly they were on their deliveries by the time I arrived at work for the 9.00am start. Vans from Leicester came to collect outgoing post at 11.00am and then at 5.00pm in the evening. There was a wall post box outside our post office, which we would empty, and there were other post boxes: one was in New Road near the railway bridge and there were pillar boxes across the road in Station Street and on Fleckney Road (where they are still today) – these were emptied by the postmen.



Station Street, Kibworth c1930, showing locations of numbers 9 and 17

Apart from stamps, there were numerous other duties to perform. There was the telegram service. Any customer who wanted to send an urgent message by the postal system would come into the post office and write their message on the appropriate form and pay the fee which was based on the number of words. So only a few words was the cheapest way of messaging. Then we, the counter staff, would telephone the message to the appropriate telegraph office and there the message would

In the 1970s the counter staff had to 'stamp', or frank, over postage stamps on letters and parcels before they were sent off for sorting in Leicester. This 'stamping' was to apply the date and time of posting and to prevent re-use of postage stamps. Later the stamping was done by machine at the Leicester sorting office.

be handwritten on to a second form. That written message would be delivered immediately to the named recipient.

I was soon given a set of keys for the post office and its safe. This was useful for opening and closing when Mrs Collis was not available. One lunchtime I remember well. Mrs Collis had asked me to lock up for her. When I returned for 2.00pm a postman was standing outside. 'Who locked up at dinner time?' he asked. 'I did'. 'Well' said the postman in an accusing voice, 'You didn't – you left the door undone.' I learnt my lesson and never did it again! One early recruit was Betty Gresty; she would work in the afternoons so I could work in the mornings. But we had to be flexible and assist one another. She was a little younger than I was. You see, I was 48 by the time I started work in the Station Street post office.

Postal orders were an alternative to cheques in those days. Not everyone had a bank account anyway, but postal orders were useful especially for modest amounts and were better than sending cash through the post. These looked rather like cheques but were pre-printed in different values from a few pence up to £10 or so. After paying for the chosen value, plus a small administration charge, the customer would fill in the name of the recipient and post it off. These were quite popular at one time.

First and second class post existed in those days. I'm not certain now about costs of postage stamps for letters but my recollection is that they were still around 1p to 2p (decimalisation had taken place in 1971).

Customers' parcels were received, weighed and priced; the fee was related to weight. The wrapping or packet was always checked to make sure it was secure and would not easily split open during later handling. If necessary, we used a red sealing wax to fix string or paper wrapping. These parcels would leave the post office with letters for the central sorting office. I can remember that by 5.00pm the post office floor would be nearly covered with parcels waiting to be collected.

Various other goods were displayed for sale in the post office to help make it financially worthwhile. There were picture post cards of both Beauchamp and Harcourt in those days, selling for only a few pence. But the most profitable lines were greeting cards such as for birthdays and anniversaries. We were allowed to sell these for double the wholesale price we paid. That was normal practice.

Earlier Days

I was born and brought up in Kibworth, living for most of my life until marriage at 3 Gladstone Street. Father worked at the hosiery factory of Johnson and Barnes just around the corner at the junction of Fleckney Road and Dover Street. So it was not surprising that he was able to find me a job there when I left school at fourteen years of age. My schooling had been at the National-Junior school on Station Street prior to Hanbury Secondary Modern School at Church Langton.

My work in the factory was linking together, by machine, the foot, heel and leg of women's stockings. There was good humour in factory life, but one had to keep working hard as pay corresponded to output. At first I earned one penny and a farthing (1¼ old pennies) for every dozen pairs of stockings completed. The early years at the factory were during the latter part of World War 2. If the fire door near where I worked was opened I could see our house only a short distance away. I can remember that on hearing the war in Europe was over, we all went down to the Royal Oak public house in the High Street to celebrate.

After the war, my friend Jessie Armson and I left the village to work for the NAAFI (Navy, Army and Air Force Institute) in North Leicestershire. This was an organisation providing leisure and canteen facilities for off-duty servicemen and women. Jessie seemed to enjoy this but I didn't, and so I returned to the hosiery factory in Kibworth.

In 1946 I met the man who was to become my husband, Geoffrey Butteriss. This was at a Village

Hall dance. Our friendship developed and we married on 21 August 1948 at St Wilfrid's Church.

Our first home together was in Kibworth Harcourt. Geoff was a Harcourt man having lived in Main Street, but we rented a cottage at 20 Albert Street. This was next to a farm. A considerable amount of land and property at that time were still owned by Merton College, Oxford, and so we paid our rent to them. I recall that we were plagued by mice, but we became expert at catching them. A neighbour remarked that she had not seen mice for a long time since we lived there!

In those days Lynn's grocery store was next door to the Station Street post office. It was the weekly practice for a shop man to collect our order and then deliver the groceries to our home a few days later by van. Years later, our house and the farm were demolished to make way for new properties. But I think there is a bit of our old wall paper still stuck on a brick wall that survives.

We moved to Hillcrest Avenue for a few years and later to a maisonette in Home Close.

High Street Post Office

Margaret Collis realised that the Station Street premises were too small for an expanding business. People were moving to Kibworth and more services were being taken on by the post office. She was successful in her search for a better place and took on the lease at 40 High Street. This was turned into the new Kibworth Post Office and has continued there to this day.

Number 40 had larger areas for the public part of the post office and also for sorting and storage at the rear. Vans could now deliver and collect mail from the back of the building. Previously vans had to park in Station Street and sometimes caused an obstruction to traffic flow there. Benefits for the counter staff were that stools soon became available and the post office had heating. Wonderful!

The move to High Street took place in April 1979. I recall that, when moving equipment from Station Street, the carrier used a trolley to transport the safe: it fell off on to the road at the roundabout. There were five or six 'posties', one being a woman. Deliveries to homes and businesses at that time were twice daily during the week, one in the morning and one in the afternoon.



A post office also existed in Smeeton Westerby at 1 Springfield Lane. We cooperated where we could, for example if the Smeeton office ran low on postage stamps we would help out. Unfortunately that office closed in 1984.

There were several tasks that only the postmistress herself could do. Thus she would handle money orders and if something very special came, such as a letter from the Queen to be delivered, she would have to take it in person to the recipient's house.

Paying pensions and benefits was a key service at the post office. In those times people would come into the office on set days with their pension book which showed how much was due. This amount was handed over in cash and the book stamped appropriately. It was essential that the post office kept adequate supplies of monetary coins and notes. I can recall Mrs Collis asking my husband sometimes, when available, to come to the post office and use her car to drive into Leicester to collect fresh supplies of money or postage stamps as required. When the care home for elderly folk opened in Smeeton Road,

we had the weekly task of collecting and paying pensions for each of the residents on Thursdays. Among other duties was the Post Office Savings Bank. Members of the public could open an account and pay in or draw out at our post office. This entailed writing by hand in the individual's account passbook, filling in the appropriate form and at the end of the day the postmistress had to send off the forms to the Bank's headquarters.

All this activity meant that one got to know regular customers and friendships developed. But it was not all plain sailing: there was a down side. On one occasion a young man came in to re-licence his vehicle. He had all the paperwork. However, it was the last day of the month and his insurance etc expired that same day. He wanted a new licence to commence on the following day and I knew his documents were not valid for tomorrow. 'I'm ever so sorry' I said, 'I can't issue a licence for when your papers will be out-of-date.' He stormed out of the post office shouting abuse at me!

I'll relate another sad experience. I went into work one morning and Mrs Collis told me that the Post Office Police were at the back of the premises making investigations. All the staff were to be interviewed over alleged fraud. One woman went in and was there for some hours. On coming back out we learnt she had been dismissed and had to leave immediately. Apparently, and totally unknown to the rest of us, she had been making out orders payable to herself. For instance, some customers would come in, buy a postal order and ask the counter staff to fill in the name of the recipient, they would hand over the payment and envelope for it to be posted off. But we learnt that this woman had been filling in her own name and not posting the letter, and later had cashed the postal orders. It had come to light following increasing complaints from customers that their orders were not reaching the intended recipients. I've no idea how much money was involved but we heard that her house mortgage had been paid off, and new carpets etc fitted. The rest of the staff at the time were not required for interview. Nevertheless, it was a terrible ordeal for us.



Doreen Butteriss in 1991

The post office continued selling various items to enhance revenue. Mrs Collis installed two glass display cabinets with small china figures and animals for sale. Customers would ask about ones that attracted them and we had to let them handle the goods. Some toys and sweets were also sold alongside the ever popular greetings cards.

By 1989 Mrs Collis was quite unwell and she decided to step down as postmistress. It meant a change of leadership. Richard Green was to become the new postmaster for Kibworth. His profession had been in accountancy but job opportunities were tight so he and his wife had decided to look around. The hand over took place on 15 July 1989. Mr Green had worked with us in the post office as a volunteer for a few months to gain experience.

Internal changes in layout and fittings were made. Mr Green also wanted to provide a ramp for customers at the front entrance door which has a couple of steps for access. Designs were eventually rejected on the grounds that any ramp would unacceptably narrow the footpath.

As time went by equipment was updated or changed. Services continued to expand. But there were threats as well, such as the drive to pay pensions and benefits directly into people's

bank accounts rather than post offices paying in cash. Nevertheless we continued to serve the village in other ways.

One day a gypsy came in selling small bunches of white heather. I didn't buy but she said 'Never mind, my dear, you'll live to be a hundred' – quite a surprise to one of my daughters!

For many years Kibworth held an annual carnival. Businesses and organisations were encouraged to provide themed floats (i.e. lorries or wagons decorated in line with the theme and carrying adults/children suitably dressed up as part of the display). Mr Green had a great interest in theatre and he always tried to produce a theme based on the post office. We contributed several such floats to the carnival over the years. I remember one had a subtle title: 'post-natal' for a display using children!



Richard Green presents Doreen with a bouquet, 1995

I took the decision to retire, officially, when I was sixty three. We had got on well and I enjoyed the work and meeting people, and so I agreed to be available in a part time capacity should Mr Green be short of staff on occasions. In the event, this 'on call' role went on for a further four years. My final day on the staff came on 11 May 1995.

Doreen Butteriss
Recorded in March 2014

Editor's Notes

(abstracted from, and with acknowledgment of, the Kibworth & District Chronicle):

The June 1984 issue reported: 'Mrs Collis' staff were Doreen Butteriss, Barbara Samuel and Shirley Loach. 'I couldn't have better counter assistants' said Mrs Collis. There were six postmen: Roy Javes, Don Jones, Mick and June Deacon, Andrew Ablett and Dennis Timson. The post office continued paying pensions and allowances while the present DHSS strike is on.'

In the November 1988 issue was this report: 'Counter staff at the post office were Doreen Butteriss and Angela Turnell. They cope with 40 different forms and 155 different types of transaction each day, including pensions, child benefits, motor tax, TV licence, gas and electric bills.'

And in the September 1989 issue: 'Counter clerk is Doreen Butteriss joined by Beverley Clay of Fleckney.'

In January 1991: 'The post office is now dealing with 200 different types of transaction.'

The May 1995 issue reported Doreen's 'final' retirement. She said 'I've really enjoyed my time behind that glass screen and many customers have become friends; in my time I've seen many changes in the work we do and really it's all the new technology and new transactions coming through that has made me decide to retire.' Postmaster Richard Green said 'I don't think Doreen realised just how much she has helped me during the six years she has worked for me. When I came in 1989 I was totally inexperienced about counter procedures and Doreen's experience, local knowledge and the rapport she had with our customers played a vital part in my settling into the community.' Doreen was presented with a gold chain and bouquet of flowers by Richard and his staff. A plant was also brought and presented from the Leicester head office.

Editor's Notes on Local Post Offices

For over 100 years Kibworth's and Smeeton's post masters and mistresses often managed post offices alongside other employments or jobs. The villages' post offices were sub-offices of Leicester and so the managers were designated sub-post masters or mistresses. One or more office assistants were also employed in addition to staff collecting and delivering the post.

Kibworth Beauchamp

Approximate Dates	Post Office Location	Sub-Post Master/Mistress
1862-1877	Rectory Cottage, 30 Church Road	John Spence (also a parish clerk and tailor)
1877-1880	Rectory Cottage, 30 Church Road	Mrs Rhoda Spence
1880-1899	Rectory Cottage, 30 Church Road	Miss Ada Spence (also did some teaching)
1899-1908	33 Church Road [known locally at the time as Kibworth Harcourt Post Office]	Charles W Cooper
1908-1914	33 Church Road [known locally at the time as Kibworth Harcourt Post Office]	James Roe (also a shoemaker)
1908-1945	17 Station Street	Charles W Cooper / C Johnson / Harold Mason / Kate Armson & probably others [dates of each not yet determined]
1945-1975	9 Station Street	George Cookman & probably others [dates of each not yet determined]
1975-1979	9 Station Street	Margaret Collis
1979-1989	40 High Street	Margaret Collis
1989-2012	40 High Street	Richard Green

Smeeton Westerby

Approximate Dates	Post Office Location	Sub-Post Master/Mistress
1895-1922	?	Robert Smalley (also a blacksmith) & John Peberdy [dates of each not yet determined]
1940s-1966	1 Springfield Lane	Miss Tarry
1966-1984	1 Springfield Lane	Anne Toombs

The information on pages 6 and 7 has been gleaned from trade directories (1862-1936), from the Kibworth & District Chronicle and from Philip J Porter ('Kibworth to Smeeton – A stroll down memory lane – III'); photographs on page 5 were loaned by the Kibworth & District Chronicle. Grateful acknowledgements to all these sources are made.

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