

114 Shopping Days

As we approach Christmas, the passage of time is often expressed as the number of shopping days remaining. Also, each year we may notice the latest techniques used by retailers to encourage us to buy, both for daily needs and for the special demands of the festive season. This can remind us how much this whole business has changed within our living memory.

One current trend is 'online' ordering and card payments, which means that some customers do not even need to leave the house. Leading supermarkets dispatch the orders with their fleet of vans, which manage to penetrate even the remotest narrow lanes of our countryside as 'Satnavs' pursue the relevant postcode. At the same time, numerous carriers and the postmen deliver parcels from the likes of Amazon and others. Some days the post seems dominated by yet more catalogues designed to keep this system going.

Aspects of this modern trend are but revised versions of systems which served rural areas in the past, especially after the development of motor transport in the 1920s. Then, principal grocers of a market town, such as Morris & Co in Shrewsbury, sent out 'travellers' gathering orders which would be delivered by company van a few days later. Morris & Co boasted a fleet of 40 vehicles, some of which were devoted to this trade. Herbert Lewis of Milnsbridge, off Shepherds Lane, served a seven year apprenticeship with this company and then, when married, worked as such a traveller for Midgleys of Newport. When he was called up in the war, the army made use of all his car experience by sending him to Sandhurst as a driving instructor..... but in tanks! (polite 'shop' manners probably helped too).

The mail order system for goods not normally held by 'small town' shops was probably first developed in the United States in response to their widely scattered farming population (who could also use the catalogues in the privy!). An amusing story told by Alistair Cooke concerned a group of Americans discussing relations with the Soviet Union during the 'Cold War': one said "We should just nuke the Ruskies"; but another said "No, just drop Sears-Roebuck (department store) catalogues on them so they can see what they have been missing under the commies."

Locally, the lanes were always busy with sales traffic, the milkman being perhaps the most regular. Before Prices of the Woodlands, George Dudley and Family of Bicton Villa served the community over several decades. In the beginning the milk was dispensed from an open churn into the customers' own jugs; the familiar glass bottle came later.

When this rural area still lacked electricity, another important regular was Charles Birch from Shrewsbury bringing lamp oil. The Morris bakery also had a regular bread round, while other specialists brought different foods: Bill Price of Montford Bridge (fish), Hynes of Ford (meat) to name but a few who came and went over the years. Together they incidentally provided some welcome social contact to otherwise isolated cottage families.

In a pioneering way, the Co-op set up a more general mobile shop to tour the local villages. Paddy McLoughlin, after working in a normal shop, went on to establish his own small fleet of similar mobile shops based in Bicton Lane. After he closed down in the 1970s, his warehouse housed other

businesses until eventually being taken over by Dairyscope. The adjacent shop reverted to a normal residence.

About this time, a retailing revolution was taking place in town – Safeway self-service supermarket arrived in Abbey Foregate. Others followed later on the edge of the town and we have witnessed their impact on traditional 'High Street' trade. The Morris Company, for instance, gave up their grocery stores and concentrated on other activities in property, leisure and care homes, which we see around us today.

Locally, small village stores continued, partially thanks to sub-post office functions, at Bicton Heath and Montford Bridge. However, these too have now gone.

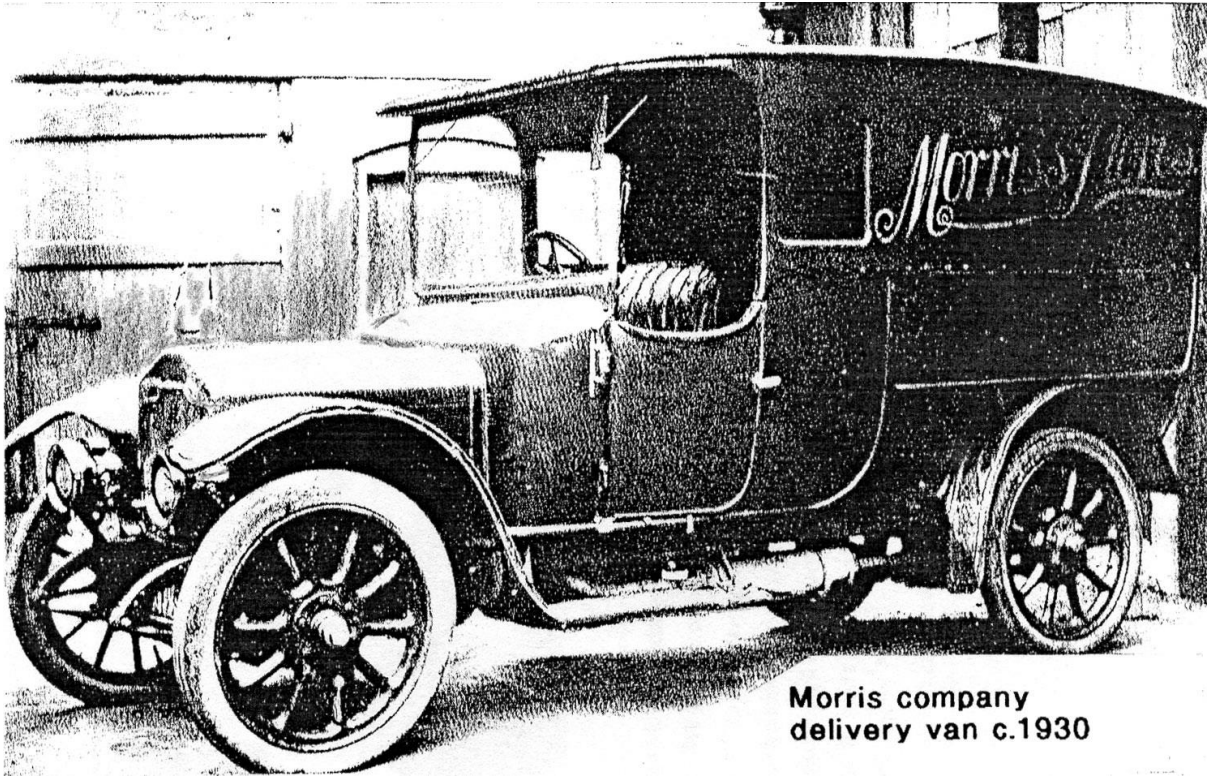
Small filling stations also came under threat from the supermarkets and either closed or reinvented themselves as combined convenience stores and garages offering other services on the regular commuter routes in and out of town. It is now hard to recall that the Four Crosses filling station was once attached to the Inn, while that at Chavel (Ford) was little more than a shed. The Mount garage had a similar story.

The big 'out of town' supermarkets aimed to cater for the 'weekly one-stop shopping' but now realised that local convenience stores were successfully selling frequent basket loads rather than those big trolley loads. In response they have been joining in, both in the suburbs and town centre.

Throughout this story, there has been an associated revolution in packaging. The 'old time' grocery stores sliced bacon, weighed out loose sugar, dried fruit, biscuits etc. which were then wrapped by the assistants in brown paper parcels or bags. No wonder the trade required a long apprenticeship.

Back home such ingredients demanded more work from the housewife, especially in the annual ritual of making a Christmas pudding. Now, even these can be bought ready-made, along with a range of partially prepared foods and ready meals encased in plastic designed for the microwave.

While this has been going on, however, a sort of revolt against it has developed in the form of 'Farm Shops', where fresh local produce replaces all those far travelled pre-packed goods. Here, a real butcher can cut meat in front of the customer and most goods are taken away in paper rather than plastic. Battlefield and Churncote are good examples of this. Each also offers dining space using those same local ingredients, where one can also relax away from the hectic Christmas shopping.



**Morris company
delivery van c.1930**

