

MEMORIES OF ARDLEY'S - HIGH ROAD, WOODFORD GREEN

by Len Seager

In her contribution, Dorothy Brooks refers to: "an excellent household goods store which stocked all kinds of kitchen ware as well as china and glass items".....

Originally, the shop was called 'Stephens' and was run by two brothers. One was the 'all round' shopkeeper, dealing with buying, display and sales. The other was the book-keeper.

In late 1970 the first brother passed away and, with a book-keeper in charge, the shop started to lose its appeal to customers.

Cyril Ardley, who had two shops selling similar stock, heard that Stephens might be put on the market and he negotiated a partnership with the remaining brother and gradually restored the shop, starting with transferring stock from his other shops. As a friend, I used to help him with book-keeping and, at this point, I became involved with the Woodford Green shop accounts, ensuring correct records of stock transfers were maintained. After a year or so, Mr. Stephens, who was in his eighties, retired and the shop became 'Ardley's of Woodford Green'.

One Christmas, when the shop was very busy, Cyril called me from the office to assist in the shop. Whilst I had some sales experience, it took some time to get used to the various types of merchandise - and, more importantly, prices, such as £60 for a teapot!!!, but I loved it and took to it like a duck to water. I was then invited to become a Partner in 1977 and was trained by Cyril in the many aspects of successful shopkeeping.

Although Woodford Green was well developed, it maintained a village atmosphere and customers became known by name as they regularly purchased household items such as china, glass, Pyrex etc. There were also large displays of gifts - Wedgwood, Spode, Thomas Webb Crystal, Denby, Homsea, top quality stainless steel (Old Hall) etc. etc. and browsers were welcome.

I had previous connections with the gas industry and we became authorised dealers for North Thames Gas, displaying and selling gas appliances. With British Gas, I was also able to arrange cooking demonstrations in the church hall behind the shop. The first was advertised as "A, B, C" - Ardley's with British Gas, Cooking with Denby. I believe we were the largest stockist of Denby tableware in London and the Denby company was pleased to promote their wares in this way. Free tickets to the demonstration were available from the shop and 100+ people attended. A year later, a second demonstration took place in co-operation with British Gas and Old Hall, manufacturers of stainless steel cookware and various other top quality items.

Our links with Denby were further enhanced when they suggested that we might like to take some of our customers to their factory. On two occasions, our customers paid for their places on a coach and, following the trip to the factory, they then toured the production area, where much continued to be handmade and painted, and were treated to lunch in the boardroom. At the end of each trip, I allowed the parties just 30 minutes in the 'seconds shop' explaining that I would like them to save some of their money to spend in Ardley's!!!

Customer Service was the byword at Ardley's. Free gift wrapping was available, with beautiful wrapping paper available at Christmas and, if a customer wished to replace one broken item from a service purchased at the shop, if necessary, we would happily take one item from a stocked full service for the customer and then contact the manufacturers/distributors to solve the problem, which we then faced at Ardley's.

Readers may also remember that there were gas lights in the shop. Through my links with British Gas, I was able to replace the gas mantles, so that the lights could be used, providing mellow lighting, particularly at Christmas time.

The shop closed at the end of February 1987. Sadly, the independent shop could not compete with the prices offered by national stores/supermarkets which were diversifying and offering home goods etc. and even after more than 20 years, I still miss the happy times I spent there.

