

Scarborough Sea Wall Heritage Trail Project

Interview with Mrs. Eileen Gledhill of Scarborough – Remembering Rowntrees

Interviewer and transcriber: Huw Roberts

Today I'm talking to Mrs Eileen Gledhill. Born and bred in Scarborough, she was looking for her first job in the late 1940s. It was a time when Scarborough was a favourite holiday destination, and not just for the mass markets. The well to do holidayed here, and many chose to locate their family home in the town, while others moved to Scarborough to retire. The shopping experience in the town needed to match the expectations of those relatively wealthy and fashionable. Eileen is now in her 90s. She still lives in Scarborough. Her mind is sharp and her memory impeccable. Her first job after leaving school was at the high end Rowntrees department store, and I'm going to ask her to take us back to those days at Rowntrees.

Eileen, you started work at Rowntrees in the late 1940s. How would you describe the town in those days?

The town was beginning to wake up after what was our first lockdown that I remember, the war. Everything had been rationed so naturally after the war things started to appear that we'd never seen before. Rowntrees had this wonderful position in Westborough with inviting windows and all kinds of displays that attracted customers and the opportunities there I thought were very good. It was considered a privilege to work there because they did not give you a reference. The mere fact that you had been trained there was sufficient and you worked there with goodwill, and our customers, some of them were very special people throughout the town and we liked giving them the help and advice that they were seeking, especially when they were looking for new outfits to go to the different functions that were available.

There were a number of different department stores, some high end, which were competing for the business of the well to do. People eager to be seen wearing the latest fashions, I imagine. Where did Rowntrees rank amongst these and what was your initial customer facing role?

I would say they were at the top of the list because of the position they had in Westborough. Marshall and Snelgrove were the next quality store, along St. Nicholas Street but I don't think they had the advantage of the frontage unless people knew about them. Then there was Hopper and Masons and Tonks, high class furniture and household store. There was quite a lot of choice.

Scarborough also attracted a lot of working class families coming down to holiday and they did that in big numbers. They would be accommodated in the hundreds of small guest houses in the town. Did the posh department stores adopt some way of regulating entry?

Well, it was rather intimidating for people who were not used to shopping in that type of store. Unaccompanied children were not allowed. George Richardson, the doorman at the main entrance sorted it all out and there was never really a problem. Children were regulated or were at school and didn't often enter without their parents.

Were they able to enter without their parents?

If they wanted to go in at the side or the York Place entrance, they could get in, but they would soon find themselves asked questions. Where were they looking and who were they with and should they be there?

So I'm getting the impression of a very elegant store. Was it carpeted all the way through?

Beautifully carpeted. In fact, when you first started to work there, your legs and feet ached considerably because the carpets were lush, very thick, and very tiring really.

And some people have mentioned that there might have been mannequins walking the store. Tell us about that.

Well, yes, a mannequin was employed in the gown department and she wore some lovely outfits and would walk through the shop and take the lift up into the restaurant. Where people were having coffee or afternoon tea and she would parade round and, if people liked what she was wearing, she would tell them the size and all about it and invite them to try it on if they liked to buy.

Were fashion shows put on in the store at any time?

Yes, we had an advisor called Audrey White, who was employed by the Independent Stores Association including Matthias Robinsons in Leeds, Brown & Muff at Bradford, Cockaynes in Sheffield, Hammonds of Hull, and Scarborough was, of course, Rowntrees. Audrey would go to Paris and find out all the new designs from Christian Dior, Jaques Fath, Balenciaga, and tell us where the hemlines would be, about necklines and the colours and the styles and whatever was high fashion in the cities, and come back and tell all the independents. We were her employers, really. And then she would arrange a fashion display and catwalks were arranged and tickets were given out and customers were invited to attend the fashion shows and hear all about the new designs in Paris and what they should look out for. The staff we're told as well, so that we could help the customers and give them the information that was coming from Paris.

What was the protocol for the sales staff.

There was a standard where the first sales was the senior sales person and she approached the customer first. Afterwards it was a sort of stepping stone arrangement. Apprentices and beginners didn't approach customers unless we were very busy.

And what was the system for payments?

Oh yes, well we didn't handle a lot of cash in those days. The customers had accounts and these were sent out at the end of the month and the account customers who supported Rowntrees in most of their purchases, they were obviously given preference.

I believe you were promoted eventually to manage your own department. Tell us a bit about that.

Well, you had to complete your apprenticeship, which was three years, and then as the opportunities arose throughout the store vacancies became apparent you could apply for them and, of course, you were interviewed and, if you were regarded suitable, you got the job. My first post was in the ladies footwear department, where we'd been highly trained. It was equipped with an X-ray machine. We didn't ask the customer what size shoe she wore, we decided that and then fitted her accordingly. The customer was asked to stand with their feet in the x-ray box, known as a fluoroscope and wiggle their toes and that would give us their exact shoe size.

But I moved into the Customers Advisers office, deputising for Lillian Newton. It was very interesting because it covered the whole of the 32 departments that Rowntrees had, from fur coats to carpets, curtains and furniture and, of course, drapery. It was correspondence, people wrote in to Rowntrees because we had a delivery service. We had vans delivered right round the villages all the way to York, and people wrote in asking for things and we would send them on the vans, for their approval. If they liked them, they kept them and bought them. Otherwise they would return them. It was interesting because you learned about things. I learned from curtains and Brise-bise nets down to

shoes and everything, really, and customers who asked for special things, we tried to find out and go round the shop and select them and parcel them up and send them out on the next van. I was in the customers advisers office for 12 years.

Did you run the music department at some point?

The Keith Prowse Music Publishing company came into being in about 1955 and arranged a franchise with Rowntrees. In the early 50s the American musicals were in London, things like My Fair Lady, Oklahoma, Annie Get Your Gun and these musicals were always recorded and the long playing records became the vogue. People who'd been to London and seen the shows wanted music to take home and listen to again. Keith Prowse were the masters of music and had a theatre. They were theatre booking agents and had shops all over London. Their head office was in Bond Street, and they were in Woodstock St. and Piccadilly and all over. People bought these long playing records, which were the fashion then, so they could listen to the music all over again when they'd been to London and visited the shows.

And did you get any training for that and where did you go for it?

No, I applied for the for the department manager's job and I liked music anyway, I had an affinity for music. But it was necessary to go to London to work and understand the bookkeeping which Keith Prowse had, and run it in tandem with Rowntrees so that the bookkeeping and the ordering system and delivery system worked smoothly. So whilst I was in London I was given complimentary tickets and saw lovely shows so that I could come back and talk about the music to customers and to sell these long playing records to customers in Scarborough. Opera was also very popular and since we had some very nice places in Scarborough where concerts and musicals were played, it all worked very well. The first notable customer I was aware of was Madam Loughton, the mother of the three sons, Charles the film star, Frank and Tom, owners of the Pavilion Hotel, the Royal Hotel and the Holbeck.

And were there any other famous names that you can recall?

My last customer I remember was very special, Alan Ayckbourn.

How well did Rowntrees look after their staff and what fringe benefits were there?

Oh, they were very caring for their staff. We had a health system but what we had mainly was the sports ground, Oriol, where we were given free entrance to tennis courts, the football pitch and hockey and the cricket, which lasted a long time. We were very successful with the cricket in the evening league and the Hospital Cup and Harburn Cup and we had a very good cricket team who mostly came from the factory in Wooler Street where the upholstery department and the French polishing and that sort of stuff took place.

All of those stores, the high end stores have now long disappeared. Many thanks indeed for that wonderful insight into the retail world at Scarborough in the late 40s and early 50s from somebody who recalls that time of shopping in Scarborough. Thank you very much.

You're very welcome.

Eileen Gledhill

Interviewed by Huw Roberts, November 2023

