



EMINENT KIDDERMINSTER VICTORIANS

SIR THOMAS LEA (1841-1902)

Lea could claim to be part of Kidderminster's singular local 'aristocracy' on two fronts. He was a descendant by marriage of John Broom who with John Pearsall brought Brussels carpet weaving to the town in 1749.

His other local eminence derived from his family's role as leaders at Old Meeting House founded by the dissenting followers of Richard Baxter.

Lea made his very own mark when he built Slingfield Mill in 1864 to form the centre of the family spinning business. This mill still stands in the town.

A few years later there was more evidence of Lea's ambition when he won the Kidderminster seat at the 1868 General Election, still aged only 27.

He stood again for Parliament in 1874 but lost to Albert Grant who was guilty of corrupt electioneering practices and the result overturned. Lea was offered the opportunity to fight the resulting by election but declined.

This was not the end of his Parliamentary ambitions. In the summer of 1876 he stood in the Donegal constituency in the far north west of Ireland. He lost that year but stood again successfully in a by election in 1879. 2

A national election was anticipated in 1880 and early in the year the Liberals called on Lea, when he was at home in Kidderminster, asking if he might stand as their candidate. Lea declined insisting that he had made commitments to his new constituents in Donegal from which he could not resile.

He was duly re-elected in Donegal. However troubles in Ireland were growing. Absentee MPs there were proving no more popular than were absentee landlords. By the time of the 1885 election there had been boundary changes and when Lea fought the seat of East Donegal he lost to a more avowedly Irish nationalist candidate. For an election the next year he moved across to the solidly

Unionist seat of South Londonderry and won.

While still an Irish MP he had another lasting impact on the Kidderminster townscape. He led the building of the Baxter Church (left) to accommodate the Old Meeting community with which Lea remained deeply involved. Lea took the lead in financing the scheme and laid a memorial stone in October 1884. Along with Slingfield Mill, Lea thus bequeathed the town two of its currently listed buildings.

Lea's commitment to Kidderminster was evident through the time he was an MP for Irish constituencies. In addition to the involvement with Old Meeting he was president of the Cricket Club, chairman of the Gas Company, a

mediator in trade disputes, supporter of the

Infirmary and even a regular competitor in local flower and garden shows.

Baxter Church



Slingfield Mill



He remained the MP for South Derry until the 1900 election. In 1892 he had become Sir Thomas being raised to the rank of Baronet. Eager to match this honour, Kidderminster proposed that he might become the Mayor of the town. Sir Thomas declined the opportunity citing pressure of parliamentary and other work but did accept appointment as an alderman which he retained until 1894.

He died in January 1902. His obituary in the Worcester Chronicle reported him as possessing a gentle and benevolent disposition and being truly a gentleman.

Mike Loftus

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Saturday delivery lad at Webbs – a personal memory by Anthony Green

I began working as a 'Saturday Lad' at Webbs bakery in early 1956.

Although the earliest age when it was possible to do part time work for schoolchildren was 13, I actually started a few months before my 13th birthday as my brother Vince, who was leaving school at 16 to take up an apprenticeship at Entaco, proposed me for a job there before he left.



This is a recent picture I took of the area. Peakman Street is the road to the right. On this side of Peakman Street, now Shipleys, was the Webbs Seed shop, and on the opposite side was the bakery shop, followed by further down Peakman Street by the bakery and, finally, opposite Wellington Street, the garage for the delivery vehicles.

I began by working in the seed shop which was the other side of Peakman Street from the bread shop (it's now Shipley's) where I weighed and packed seed potatoes which arrived in large sacks into brown paper bags and put on the labels.

I can still remember some of the names such as Arran Pilot (and all the other Arrans), Home Guard, King Edward and Pentland.

I also weighed out bulk peas, runner beans and broad beans and put them into their packets. I then moved over the road to the enclosed area behind the bakery where the vans were loaded and charged, and other activities were carried out.

A task I well remember was bread slicing and wrapping. The machine would never be allowed these days, as it consisted of a row of vertically activated blades (similar to hacksaw blades) and you pushed the large tin loaf down an inclined chute using the other loaves so that it was pushed through the blades.

The sliced loaf then went through a complex, and largely unreliable, wrapping section which used wax paper and hot plates which swung up and melted the wax to seal the two sides.

The final loaf was pushed through using an old stale loaf!

At the beginning I helped numerous roundsmen with their rounds when their 'Saturday lad' was ill or on holiday. I think that I must have delivered bread in every road in the town! However, eventually, I had a permanent round where I helped the roundsman every Saturday.

The routes were amazingly spread. My permanent round did Bridley Moor Road, the Cedar Road area (we used to go to the Cedars and the housekeeper used to come out and collect the bread), we then crossed Hewell Road and went up Dixon's yard, past the coal sidings, and up to the wooden bungalows.

We then returned, went along Elm Road, Britten Street, turned into Bromsgrove Road and did all the houses as far as Cherry Tree Walk. We then crossed the town and did Marsden Road (including Mount Street and Glover Street) and Lodge Road and then did Farm Road/Sillins Avenue area. I think that we had one or two other bits and pieces as well and by the time we had finished the poor old battery in the float was really struggling.



The vehicles used within the town were battery powered delivery vans.

This Co-op van is a good example of the type used by Webbs.

They had lead acid traction batteries which could give a good discharge over a long time. They were particularly used in the 50s and 60s for bread and milk delivery. This type of delivery is suited to battery powered vehicles and, after a long pause, we seem to be going back to this concept with modern technology.

When I think of the amount of cash, I carried in my leather money satchel, it is horrifying in terms of the risks today, but then it was not an issue.

I worked at Webbs for 5 years, beginning a few months before my 13th birthday and finishing a few months before my 18th birthday, as I thought that perhaps I should do a bit of revision for my 'A' levels.

I never thought that giving up my Saturday in this way was an imposition and it was satisfying to earn a little bit of money of my own.

I learnt a lot about the value of money, about people and about work, all useful stuff for later in life.

Anthony Green

Lowe's Ropeworks, Wribbenhall.

I must have discovered the mysterious alley that led from the top of Westbourne Street onto Station Drive as a young lad in the 1950's. It was created by the building of the railway viaduct that crosses over the main Kidderminster Road, with its amazing offset arch and I have often wondered what that area was like before it was built. Whatever, the houses and road structure in place prior to the construction must have afforded a better access for raw materials and finished goods leaving the site.

The Red Lion Pub was on the corner of Westbourne Street and you walked past it about 10 yards before coming to the Ropeworks entrance. There was a tall timber gate painted black and set at the end of a brick wall, with the company details sign-written in white. There was then some more black fencing before a set of double doors set in a large timber building with a tiled roof. This was the main entrance for raw materials. All the times I walked or cycled past these doors I never saw them open. It was impossible to see in which made it a place of mystery. However, I did know that there was a rope walk alongside the railway, that ran from the railway arch in Northwood Lane, accessing the Hollow Crundalls, up to my Grandmother's Garden about three hundred yards further on. This was used for making longer Wagon and Ship's ropes. However, this trade must have been abandoned post war as by the mid 1950's the bottom end was let for pig rearing.

My Father, Ken, was born in the cottage in 1921 and clearly remembered ropes being made.

Adjacent to the brick-built pigsty at the top of their garden, stood the rope making building.

I only vaguely remember it being there and it was covered in undergrowth by then. Dad told me as well as a twisting machine, to wind the strands stretching down the walk, together there was also a galvanised cauldron that was used to put preservative onto the wound ropes.

Whenever they were boiling up the preservative concoction it gave off a therapeutic smell, which gave relief to anyone with breathing difficulties. Lowe's used to advise the local doctors when they were brewing up and they would send their asthmatic or bronchial patients to go and have a sniff and get some temporary respite.

By 1971 the owner of the Ropeworks, whose name I think was Jack Hector, was getting on and the business had been left to run down. It was operating on machinery bought second hand in the 1860's and was down to one employee who was approaching retirement so the decision was made to cease trading. The whole site was sold to local businessman Walter Cross and Dad rented the String making factory building as the home for his new business Bewdley Printing Co Ltd. I still remember going through the gate at the top of the yard just after Christmas 1971

and discovering the Victorian industrial wonderland that had been hidden from me as a boy. As a young child I never imagined I would spend 20 years of my working life tucked away there!

Neil Sollom

Pillar Box, Post Box, Letter Box...



Malvern has three rare examples of early letter-boxes, in a fluted column style made by Smith & Hawkes in 1857.

Before 1879, letter-boxes were painted green, not red; some had vertical slots, though these let the rain in. This one is on Worcester Road, outside the hospital, and has benefitted from some recent TLC!

But a similar style by the Penfold foundry outside the

Cathedral in Worcester is a replica; in 1988, Royal Mail installed around 100 of these, produced by Machan, a Scottish foundry, in heritage locations.



However, there is a genuine late Victorian letter-box in the city, standing quietly in Lowesmoor, by Vesta Tilley House, made by the Derby foundry of Handyside & Co. It must have seen Vesta Tilley herself arriving to perform! Perhaps she posted a letter there...



Jan Scrine
The Milestone Society

On 20-21 June, The Hanleys Village Society is holding an Open History Weekend at Hanley Swan Village Hall, Welland Road, Hanley Swan WR8 0AN, 10 am - 5 pm both days, for all those interested in the history of the parish of Hanley Castle, Entry free. Further information from Malcolm Fare at malcolm.fare@gmail.com or 01684 311994.

Fashion hazards through time

The Romans' clothing was normally pretty practical – wool or linen togas were suitable for the climate and comfortable to work and play in, but worn or ill-fitting sandals or boots could cause tripping hazards.



Medieval long sleeves and tall conical hats for women, long pointed shoes (known as Pulaines) which originated in Poland and spread through Western Europe in the 1300's became so long, particularly in the European courts, that a strap from the toe was attached to the man's leg to enable men to walk. Warfare at the time caused combat armour to become heavier with limited visibility, inability to fight on foot and exhaustion.

Heavy embroidery, padding, quilting, larger ruffs around the neck caused Elizabethan clothing to weigh heavily on the wearer. Wigs became popular and Queen Elizabeth I had a red one to appear youthful as her own hair lost its colour.

In the late 17c Charles II brought French fashions with him on the Restoration. Both sexes wore mainly comfortable clothes in sumptuous fabrics, with velvet popular for men and women. Although women usually wore their own hair in long styles, for men elaborate, long shoulder length curled wigs required high maintenance. Wigs were not without other drawbacks, as Diarist Samuel Pepys noted on March 27, 1663:

I did go to the Swan; and there sent for Jervas my old periwig-maker and he did bring me a periwig; but it was full of nits, so as I was troubled to see it (it being his old fault) and did send him to make it clean.

Of course less well-heeled people had other problems, such as getting enough warm clothing for winter but there always seems to have been hand me downs and recycling. These too could be hazardous, as the box of clothing sent from London during the Great Plague brought the pestilence to the village of Eyam in Derbyshire in 1665.

In the Georgian period, wigs became smaller and men's clothing more tailored. Black became highly favoured for men's suits as it was costly to dye. Court dresses were heavily embroidered with layers of petticoats underneath and heavy structures held the fabric out on both sides of the figure. Powdered wigs became the norm for formal occasions and your hairdresser would use a wooden paddle trap which contained a cloth spread with honey to catch fleas.

Etiquette ordained that you had to stand in the presence of the King and Queen and if you were caught short your maid would discreetly apply a china sauceboat shaped vessel underneath your

skirts and remove the contents. I guess you may have had to practice this at home before appearing at Court.

Later lighter fabrics such as printed cotton and muslin became available and more comfortable for women, but were terrible fire hazards from open fires and accidents with candles. Men and their valets struggled to achieve the perfect high neckwear and if you were concerned about your weight – yes, men wore tightly laced corsets.

Early Victorian crinoline dresses with lighter whalebone hoops meant women had to be very careful sitting down and caused doors within buildings to have to be widened to accommodate them. Agnes Poynter (nee MacDonald) the wife of Edward Poynter RA was in the forefront of fashion but, while staying in a country house with friends, found she could not get into her bedroom and embarrassingly had to remove her hoop in the corridor.

More exaggerated later Victorian fashion encouraged tiny waists for women, when tight lacing caused fainting, reduced lung capacity and encouraged women to diet. New synthetic dyes for clothing could be problematic, such as arsenic used for green fabrics and wallpaper designs. Napoleon may have been poisoned by wallpaper in his house at St Helena. Top hats were treated with mercury which led to hat makers being poisoned – hence the old saying “Mad as a hatter”.



As women became more emancipated and wanted to enjoy more freedom, long dresses caused many bicycle accidents until divided skirts and bloomers came along, but gradually over the years clothes became more practical and comfortable for both men and women. Photographs show my mother in a surprisingly short skirt and bobbed hair playing tennis in the early 1930's. I well remember my mother knitting me a swimsuit for our only wartime seaside holiday. I was very proud of it and enjoyed playing in the shallow water at Rhyl until I realised the swimsuit had stretched way down towards my knees. We suffered from “liberty” bodices and older girls and women's stockings were held up by the dreadful suspender belts. Oh the bliss and freedom of tights! Post war, The New Look opened up the manufacture of cheaper copies of fashion styles, but created lots of ironing.

Winkle pickers have no doubt caused many bunions and foot malformations over the ensuing years as have 4 inch heels but we are lucky to have a range of waterproof clothing, since untold people died from getting thoroughly wet and cold. We benefit from non-crease, drip dry and breathable fabrics, but can still be victims of wardrobe malfunctions such as broken straps and broken zips, etc.

Diana Clutterbuck

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