

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

The Shops of Old Haverfordwest Patricia Swales Barker



Haverfordwest has been a significant market centre since the Middle Ages. One of the earliest records of a market Charter was that granted by King John, in 1207. Markets were held in St Martin's Churchyard before being moved to St Mary's churchyard, then spreading to surrounding streets. Goods come from the surrounding countryside and by sea and Haverford became an important port. The quays handled exports of wool, cloth or hides and imports included luxury goods. Sea trade continued to

be important to the town until the coming of the railways in the C19th.

Haverfordwest was crowded with family-run businesses, local and independent traders forming the heart of the town's business. Sons went to London, to be apprenticed, and returned run the family business. The longest surviving business, on High St, Munt's Jewellers, now its 8th generation in the same family. S&F Green was started by Stephen Green who, after his apprenticeship in London, set up his ironmongery shop and – after taking his nephew into the business - expanded into bicycles and motor-cycles then into motors and buses (in Withybush).

Early trading was often conducted from the front room of the family's home, with them living above the 'shop'. Little 'corner-shops' provided community 'convenience' stores (there were bakery shops all over town) providing the essentials for their neighbourhoods. Few remain as family businesses. The range of businesses on High Street reflected the way that every need of the population was met at the local level: women's clothing, jewellery, men's tailors, ironmongers, tobacconists, book-binders, off-license, grocers, butchers, chemists, barbers ... Growth in retail meant employment not just for family members but also for clerical assistance and it spread to associated services of insurance and banking. By the end of the C19th ready-made garments were replacing the individually tailored items and eventually mass-produced goods and chain-stores pushing out most of the independent family businesses. 'Potter's' offered not only a library and book-binder, but also a tobacconists and billiard rooms! In the 1870s it became a 'grocers' but, by building back into the rock, the result was a vast 'Emporium'! On Market Street was 'Commerce House', one of the first large department stores - offering a wide range of ready-made goods from clothing to furniture. At its peak over 50 apprentices lived in, working the shop-floor, café, clerical and warehouse. In 1926 the head of the town's other main department store, Ocky White's, heard that 'Woolworths' was coming to town and moved in opposite - to take advantage of the people visiting 'Woolworths'!

Many of the shop owners became significant members of the community and many became members of the town council and were able to influence improvements in the town - attracting people in to shop. After the gradual development of the town over 2 centuries the downturn started with the move of the market to Riverside in the 1980s and the development of 'out-of-centre' shopping in the C21st!

For more see Pat's book "Shops of Haverfordwest"

