

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

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Goodbye Woolies

©Jack Turnbull

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Woolworth's store in High Street, Saffron Walden, probably 1953, the Coronation year. Photograph David Campbell © Saffron Walden Town Library.

'Goodbye Woolies' – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 17 (2009)

I guess I am one of the rapidly dwindling number who witnessed the opening of the Woolworths store at 26/28 High Street, Saffron Walden in, I believe, 1934. The 1933 edition of Hart's town directory lists No 26 as the Prudential Assurance Office and No 28 as The North Essex Motor Company, a motor spares shop. These two old properties were demolished and replaced by Woolworths' splendid new modern store.

At that time the population of Saffron Walden was barely 6,000 – today it is probably nearer 16,000 - so it was indicative of Woolworths' rapid expansion plans that they considered it viable to invest heavily in a comparatively small town. I recall that there was much speculation locally at that time that as Woolworths were here, Marks & Spencer would surely follow – but they never did! Was it perhaps their 'nothing over sixpence' (2½p in today's currency) pricing strategy which captured the customers during the 1930s when 'money was tight'. My first purchase from the new store as a young teenager was a small ratchet screwdriver for sixpence. It was an excellent little tool and served me well for around 50 years until it finally failed!

Woolworths in Walden also played a small, but useful, part in the war effort. When the Government appealed for local communities to recruit volunteer firewatchers to act as 'first response teams' to combat the threat of incendiary bomb attacks, this was organised by the local Chamber of Trade. A number of strategically-placed locations were selected where pairs of volunteers could keep watch during the night in the town centre area, which would otherwise be deserted. One such location was Woolworths' flat roof where I recall spending nights during 1940 ready to tackle any incendiaries which, thankfully, never came.

It was sad to see the demise of Woolies which, although of American origin, had almost become a British institution.

Note: The Saffron Walden branch closed on Tuesday 6 January 2009, one of 807 Woolworths branches closed nationwide, losing 27,000 jobs. This article is by kind permission of Jack Turnbull and the editor of the *Walden Local*, in which it was published in the issue of 31 December 2008.

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