

Oral History - My First Job by G. Reeves

My first job was at W. H. Smith in Moseley Village. The year was 1952. I had just left school. I was just fifteen years old. The manager told me my wages would be £1. 10s a week paid out on Friday morning - no wage packet. I lived just a short walk from the shop, so no bus fare to find. So on a bright Monday morning in September I started my first job. I was to work at the front of the shop with a young lady assistant. She showed me how to give the right change to the customers. We had to use an old wooden cash till. You wrote down the amount on a strip of paper at the top of the till and had to check it at the end of each day's trading. We also had to keep the papers and magazines in good order and take away the old magazines when out of date.

After a few weeks in the job the manager told me I would be working with early mornings from October. It was from 6.30 – 8.30 a.m., then a two hour breakfast break until 10.30 a.m. My job was to get the papers ready for the paper boys to come in at 7.00 a.m. to take out for delivery. I wrote the house and flat numbers on the top of the paper. I also opened up the magazines to put out later on the front counter. There was 'Punch', 'Picture Post', 'Illustrated London News' and other magazines.

I remember one morning in late October a Greek Cypriot lad I worked with thought it was a good idea to let off a firework in our store room in the back of the shop. A loud bang was heard and blue smoke came drifting out into the shop and a strong smell of gunpowder. The wooden shop door opened and the old manager came into the shop. He was the manager who took me on and had moved to work in town. He said, 'Good morning, lads!' and walked into the store room full of blue smoke and the smell. My only thought was what my mother would say if I got the sack through this prank. He came back with his things and just said 'Goodbye'. We were glad no more was said.

A few weeks later we had a new manager come to work with us. He came from up North, from Alderley Edge in Cheshire. He told the staff that his wife still lived there. It seems that the manager's wages were only just about £6 a week. He told us staying in 'Bed and Breakfast' was too expensive. He got hold of a camp bed to sleep in the shop's store room. One night he locked himself out of the shop. Around midnight I was knocked up by the manager. I told him that the Greek lad had the key to the shop. He had to pay a taxi to find his home.

Christmas came. We were worked very hard over that week and were glad when Christmas Day came.

Then in the Spring of 1953 I gave in my notice and found a better job working in an office on the Moseley Road.