

From a very early age I was interested in anything mechanical. I remember nailing pieces of wood together to make crude looking aeroplanes. I lived in Hitchin and back in the 1950's my father used to take me to the annual air show at nearby RAF Henlow. I remember us waiting for the Henlow bus when an RAF lorry stopped and we climbed in the back. That was an extra treat! I can remember Lancasters and Spitfires there. I can also remember an Avro Anson used to come over Hitchin every day at around 4 pm on its way to Henlow (or was it on a school run?).

Obviously I was into bikes and soapbox carts. My friend Geoff's father ran a motor repair business within the grounds of his house. We used a lean-to shed attached to the garage as our little workshop (we now were in our early teens) I had passed the eleven-plus exam and went to the grammar school but I much preferred hands-on activity to stuffy academic leanings taught there. So it was straight home from school to rush through any homework so I could get on with the real stuff. We used to go to the local landfills to find bike parts and pram wheels. Geoff towed a little trailer behind his bike to transport our finds. We would also collect non-ferrous metal to sell to a scrap merchant for a bit of extra pocket money.

I was about sixteen when the boy next door, a fellow Cardiac Friends member, David Tookey, asked me if I was interested in taking over his Saturday job in a Hitchin High Street shop. I could not believe my luck as this was a large shop called Munt's which sold cycles, mopeds, prams and a huge selection of toys for all ages. It also had a repair workshop for cycles and mopeds. As well as Saturdays I would work full time during school holidays and sometimes after school.

The shop was double fronted with the entrance door set a few yards back from the pavement giving extra window area. The right hand side was the toy window and cycles and prams in the left. Next to the shop was a wide arch through which was a walkway to the churchyard (more window space down this side) The arch and walkway was part of the shop so every day trestle benches were put out along the archway and cycles, pedal cars, trikes and mopeds placed on display or hung up on the wall. It was a bit of a daily chore moving all this merchandise. I remember that one particular moped never sold

in all the time I was there. It was a red three speed Phillips and when I left it had nineteen miles on the clock from being wheeled daily in and out of the shop! The most popular moped was the NSU Quickly. They sold as fast as they could get hold of them.

Raleigh and Phillips were the most popular makes of bicycle. Pedal cars and trikes were supplied by Triang (Lines Bros.). Chad Valley and Lone Star were prominent toy makers. The name 'Eagle Trading Co.' rings a bell but I cannot remember what products they supplied. There was a counter devoted to model railways. These were OO Hornby and Triang and the tiny Triang tt scale. I remember selling little capsules of track cleaning fluid. Apparently it was carbon tetrachloride which is now a banned substance! Of course we stocked Dinky, Corgi and Matchbox models along with Herald and Britains vehicles and farm animals. There was a large showcase on the main counter with several shelves packed with rows and rows of little plastic animals. A child would always want one from the front of the case and it was a challenge to retrieve it without knocking dozens over.

The second floor was solely prams, pushchairs and baby toys. Makes of prams that have mostly disappeared were Marmet, Silver Cross, Wilson and Royale. The shop had extra store rooms across the road behind what was Perks and Llewellyn's chemist shop. When Perk's was demolished to make way for a new Woolworths, storage was moved to the floors above the garages in the Sun Hotel yard. The only thing I didn't like about this was if I had to ferry a pram to or from the store. It was a bit embarrassing at sixteen years of age if you met anyone you knew while pushing a pram along the high street!

October was the time to set up the firework glass topped display counter. The shop was allowed to store some extra fireworks in metal dustbins in the upstairs storeroom. The proprietor always bought much more than could be stored on the premises. This extra stock was stored in sheds at his house. I remember riding in the shop's Bedford CA van absolutely packed to its roof with fireworks taking them to his house. I never really thought about the danger at the time!

Christmas time was so busy. On Saturdays in December there would be about twenty sales assistants including temporary seasonal staff. If I

went off to fetch something from the storerooms for a customer I had to make a mental note of what they looked like because the shop would be so packed out and they had probably moved from where I had left them!

By this time Geoff and I had progressed onto motorised transport. He had a 32cc. Cyclemaster. This was a motorised back wheel fitted to a normal bicycle. My 25cc. version I never did get working. I eventually bought a second hand NSU from the shop.

Sometimes I would spend time in Munt's repair workshop carrying out work on customers' bikes. The shop had sold a Capri 80cc. scooter which later came back after being involved in an accident. The mechanic stripped it down and ordered the necessary parts and then left! I went in every afternoon after school and by the end of the week I had wheeled it down to the Sun Hotel car park and was road testing it up and down the yard.

I was sorry to give the job up when I left school. I took up an engineering apprenticeship in 1962 at Geo. W. King in Stevenage. They made cranes, hoists and conveyor systems, mainly for the car manufacturing industry. Working with different fitters in the factory for a few months at a time got me thinking that working every day at a bench was a bit daunting so I managed to get into the maintenance section and finished my time as a machine tool fitter. Until last year I had always worked in maintenance, building services, or as a mobile service engineer but in 2005 I returned to a bench job producing fire extinguishers for aircraft.

What was Munt's shop changed to a shoe shop and then to a café/brasserie. I have been in there from time to time and pictured it as it was laid out in the 60's.

Harping back to our early motoring and motorcycling days, Geoff's house was only a few yards away from a country lane from where we could ride across country for miles on old motorbikes which were definitely not roadworthy. I had a 500cc. Norton with rigid frame and girder forks followed by a 'bitsa' consisting of a 500cc Levis engine in a BSA frame. This one had no brakes at all! We ran a few old wrecks of cars as well which had been given to us as scrap. At the end of their life we would tow them to an old gravel pit and send them off a cliff while taking slow motion movies of the

event. Ironically this now seems like sacrilege as we both went on to have several old classic cars between us. One of them is a 1938 Wolseley 14 that was spared the flight over the cliff and was restored by Geoff and is now a show car. I bought a 1935 Lanchester from Geoff and owned it for 26 years. I also had a 1966 Mg Midget and a 1967 MGB Roadster. My last classic was a 2009 Mazda MX5.

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