

## **Working in Munt's Hitchin shop on Pre -Christmas Saturdays in the early 1960s**

Today it is possible to buy most of your Christmas presents in a large supermarket because they stock such a wide range of goods. If you can't find what you need in these shops then you can go to a specialist store such as Smyths for toys or Halfords for bicycles. Sixty years ago a Munt's in High Street, Hitchin was the go-to shop for children's Christmas presents. Munt's also had shops in Welwyn Garden City and Letchworth. Today the Hitchin shop as the photograph shows is Joey's Brunch Cafe in the centre of the High Street opposite what was Poundland.



**Joey's Brunch at 21 High Street, Hitchin formerly Munt's**

Although it has been split up in to several different businesses it still looks the same with the entrance between the two display windows in the front three storey building and the single storey rear extension which bordered the alley leading from High Street to the Churchyard. From the beginning of December until Christmas Eve the shop windows were decorated with coloured lights and packed with examples of the vast range of boys and girls toys that Munt's sold. One of the major exhibits was a large revolving model of a fairground roundabout made in Meccano. When I was at school I worked in the Hitchin shop Saturdays and in the holidays. Saturdays between the end of November and Christmas Eve were extremely busy. The shop's normal hours were 0830 to 1730 but on busy pre-Christmas Saturdays it was often about 1830 before we could close.

In 1960 self-service display was very rare and the items for sale were either stored on a range of floor to ceiling shelves behind a long wooden counter which ran along the right-hand side of the shop or on what looked like two semi-circular rows of "market stalls" The outer row of these "market stalls" ran around the wall of the single storey extension and the inner row in the middle with about a four feet passage between the two. Both rows were decorated with Christmas garlands and lights. A vast range of toys, dolls, teddy bears, games etc were arranged on an impressive tiered display

on an upper level and heavier items such as bicycles, pedal cars and larger doll's prams displayed on the floor underneath. Smaller items were arranged on the middle stalls. This display gave the public a comprehensive view of the range of goods available including many well-known brands such as Triang, Pedigree, Dinky toys, Meccano and Chad Valley toys. As well as Raleigh, Triumph and BSA bicycles. To provide a full customer service on busy Saturdays Munt's had about twenty-five staff to serve the customers. These assistants were either behind the long counter or strategically placed in the centre. Their task was to help the customer by showing them a range of items, telling them the price, wrapping it up and taking the money. All items had their price written in pencil on the box or a label. As this was before the abolition of resale price maintenance the price of all goods sold was set by the manufactures. There were no discounts and certainly no Black Friday sales. Credit cards had not yet been introduced and so payments were either by cheque or cash. All transactions had to be recorded on a large electro-mechanical cash register. Cash payments were made with pre-decimal pounds, shillings, and pence (£ s d). Cheques were taken provided the customer wrote their name and address on the back. Sometimes if a customer wanted something that was not on display it had to be fetched from the stock rooms above the shop. Quite often this meant battling though a hoard of customers to reach the stairs and trying to remember what the customer looked like when you returned.

**On pre-Christmas Saturdays the streets of Hitchin were very busy and many of the High Street shops like Munt's were packed out. Many shoppers came from the nearby villages by bus.**

**On these busy days my working hours were 09.00 to 12.30 and 13.30 to 18.00 and was I paid one pound for these Saturdays which was five shilling more than my usual rate of fifteen shillings (75 pence).**

**On arrival my first and most detested job was to clean the black marble facia below the display windows with an oily rag. My next task was to go down to the cellar and tie empty cardboard boxes in to bundles ready for collection by the dustmen on Wednesday mornings. After this it was time for a quick cup of tea after which I spent most of my time generally helping on the counter selling batteries, bicycle tyres etc. At 12.30 I cycled home for lunch and then returned to work at 13.30.**

**During the afternoons I spent a very busy but enjoyable time working on the model railway counter where we sold both complete boxed train sets, separate locomotives, rolling stock and track work. We had a wide range of OO gauge Hornby Double O and Triang model electric trains. Triang had just introduced a smaller scale TT (Table Top) gauge model electric train. This is now the very popular N gauge. As an alternative to the relatively expensive electric models we sold a similar range of the larger O gauge clockwork trains.**

On these pre-Christmas afternoons we were so busy that the time seemed to fly by and by about half past five the constant stream of customers had begun to dwindle and so we could gradually start to tidy up. My final tasks were to sweep the shop floor with wide brush and help bring the bicycles in from the outside display in the alley adjacent to the shop. After this I cycled home feeling tired and happy after a day's experience of retailing at the sharp end.

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**A 1961 Munt's Advertisement**

