

Fleetville Diaries Oral History Project

Gordon James

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

Date: March 15th 2013



Fleetville Diaries
the local history people

Liz Bloom 07507 684531
40 Arthur Road 01727 568863
St Albans AL1 4SZ bloom_liz@yahoo.co.uk

Find us at.....
<http://fleetvillediarie.s.webp.lu.s.n.et>

Gordon James

Interviewer: Liz Bloom

Date: March 15th 2013

My name is John Gordon James but most people know me as Gordon. I have lived in Fleetville for as long as I can remember in Burham Road with my two brothers. It was a full house and how my mother managed I shall never know.

I went to Fleetville Infant School and then into the Junior School. I can remember one teacher in particular, a Mr Coles, who was a marvellous teacher. He gave us lessons after school playing football and cricket on the Recreation Ground. On one occasion, he called on a Saturday morning to see if I was available; he took us to Lords Cricket Ground. He was a lovely man! Eventually he went on to teach at Beaumont School. I started there in 1939 when the Second World War broke out. The boys were relegated downstairs at Beaumont, and the girls upstairs - and never the twain shall meet! A lot of the teachers had been taken away for National Service. I left Beaumont at fourteen; we didn't take examinations or anything like that.

At home, during the war, when the old bombs started dropping, we had an air-raid shelter in the living room; it was a steel table with wire mesh you could put on the sides. We all dived under there with our heads underneath and our bottoms hanging out! I can remember my father say, "Come and have a look at this; London's getting it!" We could see the glow coming from that direction.

I started work at the age of eleven on the Co-op horse and cart bread round; I had to be very careful that I didn't give my age away. That was on a Saturday. We delivered into the old town of St Albans. That was a day's work from eight in the morning 'til eight at night. When the horses were replaced by delivery vans, I left the Co-op and went to work at our corner shop, Branson's in Harlesdon Road, delivering grocery orders on the push bike. I was so small that Fred Branson had to put blocks on the pedals so that I could reach them. After I left school, I went to work for him full time. I stayed there until I went on National Service at the age of eighteen. I returned to work there until my next move to the Co-op.

In between that time, I met my wife and got married; the original blind date! When I was doing my National Service in the RAF (The Brylcreme Boys) in 1946, one of the lads in the billet at Manston came from Windsor. He said, "You wouldn't do me a favour, would you?" I said, "What's that then?" He said, "Well, my girl's coming down from Ramsgate on holiday with her friend so would you make up the foursome?" That's how the friendship started. I

met Pam and we just carried on seeing each other when I came out of the services. We got married, and then, of course, in those days you lived at home with the parents because there was no living accommodation available with the Council. Pam came up here but my boss, Fred Branson wouldn't employ her because he said, "If I upset you and you leave, I would lose Pam as well."

She came along to the Co-op here on the Hatfield Road (opposite the cemetery). The Co-op boss, Albert Smith - another lovely man - said, "Well, what does your husband do?" and she told him that I worked at Branson's. I went to see him but unfortunately, the Co-op in those days only paid full wages at the age of 23, so he said, "Come and see me when you're old enough." So at the age of 23, I started work on the mobile shop. In those days, the mobile shop which the Co-op Motor Dept. produced was a long-based van; the customer was served at the back of the van on the road. The van I drove was made at Woking and it was different. The customer would enter the van at the side and turn right, following a rail which went down the centre and you would walk down and back along the other side, choosing what you needed from the shelves. When you came up to the counter - in those days there was still rationing - you were served there with bacon and butter and that sort of thing. You paid and then went out. There was a little doorway that led into the driver's cab and you would have to climb over the engine housing to get to the driver's seat. I had an assistant with me too. The days varied; on Saturday mornings, we would load up fully and park the lorry in the garage on Sutton Road. Then on Monday morning I would drive the van to the Victoria Street shop (facing what is now the police station) where the girl assistant and I would load up the perishables such as bacon and cheese. At about 9 o'clock we would be off, delivering to Sandridge, Smallford, Colney Heath and then onto the Cottonmill estate. We did those on different days. I used to pip the hooter and people would come out. We knew the customers and they knew when we would be arriving, sometimes telling us if we were late or early.

When the shops were built (which came after the houses were built), I opened up a shop at Cottonmill. I was branch manager there. From there, I became Co-op grocery warehouse manager at Castle Road. At that time, the bakery had finished so the bakery building and the stables were demolished. The grocery warehouse occupied a space between Castle Road and Hatfield Road. From there, I went into the buying office and took over the management of the branches; in those days you were called a grocery manager/buyer. From there, I went onto a much larger warehouse job in Luton which had a much larger Society.

We lived in Fleetville for almost all of our time until we were able to buy a house with dear Colin Crow at the Co-op Permanent Building Society. We bought a house on Harlesdon Road.