

## Marjorie Lyle's Reminiscences of Canterbury in the 1950s

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We came down in November 1955 for the weekend to find a house. We found Townsend, literally at the end of the town, at the end of Orchard Street, an Arts and Crafts house of 1908, with five bedrooms and a third of an acre of ground. No-one in Canterbury would buy it as it had lingered on the market- the previous owner had hanged himself. We were not told this and bought it for £2,400 and our £9 mortgage was easily covered by letting one bedroom.



*Townsend*

In Coronation year, 1953, Queen's Avenue, Crown Gardens and Prince's Way had been developed as new housing but Victoria Recreation Ground stretched out towards Harbledown except for the new secondary modern school, the Frank Hooker, at the bottom of the London Road estate.



*View from Rheims Way towards Frank Hooker school (now Canterbury High school)*

St Dunstan's Street provided all our wants in those days: bank, post office, stationer, pharmacy, butcher, greengrocer, a bakery and, of course, Fisher's on the site of what is now the Hospice shop, where patient, kind Gilbert would weigh out sugar into blue bags, cut cheese and butter, slice ham and bacon and deliver our weekly order on a Friday night after work.



*Fishers shop (now Hospice Shop)*

Next door to us were the Miss Russells in a similar Arts and Crafts house. They were two of the seven daughters of General Russell, who had fought in the Zulu War of 1879. They had occupied Barton Court and its farm, which these last two sisters had continued to run as a market garden and dairy well into the 1940s before it became the Girls' Technical High School under Miss Blackith. In their hall hung two crossed assegais from the Zulu War.



*The Misses Russell's house*

As I pushed my pram further past the Westgate where I'd already seen two butchers' shops, there were two pork butchers in St Peter's Street, two in the High Street and a further one, beyond Woolworth's. There were also two fishmongers where a boy was employed to brush the flies from the open displays of Macfisheries in the High Street and the fish market, now the fish and chip shop, in St Margaret's Street. One of the other butcher's was that of Alderman Buckworth, who told me that the day after he left the Langton School his father had given him a pole axe and told him to go and kill a calf in the slaughter house attached to the back of his shop at the end of St Margaret's Street, which is now a pharmacy. Other small, old-established shops occupied the High Street, including Gouldens, which had been going for a long time as a stationers, library and music shop. Then there was Lefevres, now Debenhams, on the site of Sidney Cooper's theatre of the 1860s.

*Lefevres (now Debenhams)*



A rather imposing house, now Zizzi's, was home to the redoubtable Dorothy Gardiner, who occupied the oldest house in Canterbury in St Peter's Street. She sent some of her members, being then the president of the Canterbury Archaeological Society, to see if we lived in the right sort of house and so it was that, having passed muster, we appeared at our first AGM, by far the youngest putated members of the Society at the County Hotel, where we were served a magnificent tea.



*Home of Dorothy Gardiner (now Zizzi's)*

Going on past Lefevres, we came to the wonderful Deakins, always with a window full of school uniforms and another of gentlemen's clothes, which had already been going for nearly 100 years. Round into Sun Street was wonderful Mears, with its rows of little boxes, where you could buy anything from one to five dozen nails, screws, cup hooks or any other small item and get your shears, scissors and knives sharpened. Kennedy's is the only survivor of that wonderful set of long-standing shops that Canterbury was full of in those days.



*Deakins (now Trappiste Restaurant)*

Mears (now Deeson's  
British Restaurant)



Kennedy's (the only survivor)



Traffic came down Sun Street and Palace Street and out into Northgate, but also all the way down the High Street. When I first started teaching at Barton Court, I would bicycle from Queen's Avenue, down to the Westgate, and then up the High Street, over the traffic lights, past Twyman's, the department store opposite the cinema, and up Ivy Lane and thence to Barton Court.

When we were first at Queen's Avenue I used to play host to the children of the members of the Young Wives Fellowship, which met at St Dunstan's Hall, where the block of flats is at the bottom end of Queen's Avenue. Mrs May and Mrs Cook, who came to look after the children while we were in Young Wives, had been shop assistants. In those days, they worked on Monday, Tuesday, Friday and Saturday full time. Thursday was a half day and of course no Sunday openings. They said the worst thing was standing up all day.

Young Wives has brought me to Canterbury's public buildings. I'm beginning of course with the churches. We attended St Dunstan's church, which still had its school, to which our middle daughter went for her primary education. Mr Lawler, the vicar, lived in the vicarage, in St Dunstan's Street, just opposite the end of Orchard Street, a very handsome Georgian house. Holy Cross, now the Guildhall, was still a functioning church, where there was a gallery where people in previous times could have the privilege of watching hangings at the Westgate. Holy Cross also had its school at the end of St Peter's Place, where the block of old people's flats now stands. Further into the town, both St Alphege and St Margaret's churches were still open as were St Paul's and St Martin's.

The current Marlowe occupies the same site as the 'big cinema', as we called it, but the very small cinema in St Peter's Street was struggling towards its end when we were first here and was soon to become a Chinese restaurant, one of the first in the town. The old Marlowe Theatre was at the bottom end of St Margaret's Street, and many a show did we go and see in the old days before we were involved in the first of the Archaeological Trust's big digs when it was demolished.



Site of original Marlowe Theatre

wind vane reminder of theatre



The Guildhall had already been demolished because the fifties were the period when anything old had to be swept away. Conservation was not the order of the day until the 1960s.

I can no longer ignore the Cathedral, the largest public building and public it was. People wandered to and fro through the Precincts at will in those day but the major personality of course was the ambivalent figure of the Dean, Hewlett Johnson, a very imposing man, the last Dean to wear gaiters. My Rotary friend, the owner of Kennedy's, said he still had a bill for the repair of these famous gaiters. With his white hair and tall figure, the Dean had been revered for his role during the Blitz and also for his care for the unemployed in the 1930s, when he set up a daily refuge in what was then the Friends' Meeting House in Iron Bar Lane. I remember him leading marches and demonstrations through the streets for nuclear disarmament and other left-wing causes.

When I was first training as a city guide, Mr Baker took me on a two-hour walk, which constituted my training. We went in through Christchurch Gate and the Precincts, the Cloisters and the Dark Entry and arrived in the Green Court to see the big banner across the front of the Deanery bearing the legend, "Christians ban nuclear weapons" for the edification of the King's School boys, and he was Chairman of the Governors. One of the best Dean stories was when a verger had gone to him saying, "Mr Dean, there is a lady in a bikini standing on the font." Instantly furious, he replied "Tell her to get off; get it off!"

One would not go to the Cathedral or even to church in those days without a hat which were still very much de rigueur, say, for Cricket Week or for any function. Lawrence will tell you about the dressing up that went on in the Archaeological Society. I wouldn't have gone out without my gloves and never, in those days, wore trousers. It was skirts and stockings because if you laddered one leg of a pair of tights you had to buy another pair. If you bought multiple pairs of stockings you could get by for longer! Costume and manners in fact were a great deal more formal. Shopkeepers would always welcome you and quite often by name. In Deakins, they even knew at a glance what your size would be!