

Remembering Grangetown

By Colin Clifford

Reading with interest the article by Father Christopher Collins and his daily visit to the cemetery got me thinking about my own daily constitutional visit to Sunderland Cemetery with my dog (also complete with doggie bag which a goodly number fail to carry or use). I also note the headstones many of which have names, which are prominent in Sunderland's history such as Sir Walter Raine (who had one of the old halfpenny ferries named after him). Sir William Allen, Sir Myres Wayman and the well-known charity benefactor to the people of Sunderland, Baronet Sir John Priestman. Many, also as Father Collins said were shipbuilders, shipowners, master mariners and river pilots however the ones which provide the greatest interest to me and probably many of the older generation of the locale are the old characters of Grangetown (which as I near my three score and ten years I remember from my childhood)

Joseph Orange Watson is buried in the left of the cemetery, died in May 1969 at the age of 87 years and for 16 years was Superintendent at Sunderland Cemetery. I can clearly remember him standing in the entrance to the cemetery in his black suit complete with waistcoat and bowler hat (and obligatory gold watch and chain) apprising anyone who entered the gates. Any young person who dared even to venture near the gateway was given short shrift and a "There's nothing here for you clear off or I'll tell your dad", (he seemed to know everyone's dad) Each evening he rang the bell at the office (its still there) to signify the gates were being closed at one hour after sunset. This was his domain.

Another headstone of interest is that of William Pickering Chalk who died in 1972 aged 97 years. To all in Grangetown he was Chalkie of Chalkies fruit shop this was where the TV repair shop is now and the upstairs of his storeroom next door (now the chiropractors) was the wartime fire control center for the Grangetown area complete with fire engine.

This got me to further thinking about the other old characters that ran shops along what was known as the "High Road".

For a number of years I delivered morning and evening papers for old Jimmy Day (who always looked about a hundred). His shop was where Martins is today but then it was a little wood counter in the front room of his cottage. He opened every morning before six o'clock and sat in the corner always wearing his trilby with a generous covering of cigarette ash on his waistcoat, supplying the steady stream of early morning workers with a Daily Herald or Mirror and five Woodbines. I delivered 110 papers on a morning, 120 on a night and an extra delivery on a Thursday with the Radio Times and Woman's Own for the princely sum of 7/6d (35p).

Old Mr Parks ran the tobacconists next to what used to be the Oxfam shop. He sold a big selection of cigarettes; tobacco and pipes along with sweets for which we used our 2oz ration coupons on a Saturday night. On entering his shop you were always greeted with the rich aroma of tobaccos and snuff.

The most useful shop in Grangetown was "Handy Alans" (where the opticians is now). He sold every thing from a tintack to a bathtub and I cannot remember anyone who couldn't be satisfied, his usual answer to a request was, "Give me a minute I think I know where there is one". After the war

he even sold the metal-clicking frogs which had been issued to the Allied forces on D-Day to identify friend from foe. He also sold strings of aluminium foil, which turned out to be “chaff” the metal foil dropped by the RAF to confuse German radar. To get the accumulators charged for your radio or your bike repaired you had to go to Conleys.

Next-door was the pork shop (Snowdon & Bailes) with Bob Gettings the manager. I remember borrowing his china lamb advert model for our Nativity play at Commercial Road Infants School.

The best fish and chips in Grangetown were from Jacksons and groceries could be obtained at Moores, Duncans or Ayres or from Shaws on Shaws corner. There were two chemists Blackstone’s and Marshall’s and Walter Atkinson had a garage (two pumps and a hut) where the now defunct petrol station now stands.

The most central feature of Grangetown was the Regent cinema 10d down stairs and 1/1d for going up the three steps at the rear. During the war there were two changes of film per week later increased to three when Sunday opening was permitted and “Flicker” the usher would see we all behaved.

There was always a long queue (usually down to where the bank is now and it was common to stand for an hour to get in and frequently to be told when you got to the door “That’s the lot its full”. Frequently there were air raids and you had to rush from the cinema to the air raid shelters, which were where the Machine Mart now stands.

Grangetown had character and you could do all your shopping in the one row of shops but the rural feeling remained. The cows were still driven daily from the byres, which are now Cliff’s garage in Hemming Street, up to the fields at the bottom of Tunstall Hill. Leechmere Road ended then at the hut (later Pucci’s) hut, which was also a fire station during the war. This was before the advent of Hillview estate, which only came post war.

Only two minutes walk from the shops, next to the cemetery was Tom Clarks farm, one of Tom Seymours market gardens was next to the “Top Grange” pub and of course the old windmill or the “coffee pot”, as it was known, in Mr Johnson the milkman’s field.

Yes, Grangetown has changed. Many of the older generation will remember Madge Shelton in the Post Office, Mrs Bradwells shop, where everything smelled of paraffin and firelighters, (even the bread). Butcher Watson and the off license, the police box complete with PC Harper from whom I received many a clout with his leather gloves, his usual retort when I explained I hadn’t done anything being “Well that for when you do”.

Finally many of our older residents will remember the American soldiers who were in tents on “Sparkies”farm (later Wearside College) prior to the invasion in 1944. At the age of seven this was when I got my first taste of chewing gum.

Please forgive this short walk down memory lane but then you were proud to say you were a “Grangee”.

Colin Clifford.