

A GRANGE GROCERY BUSINESS

In the CPLHS Newsletter of October 2016 Malcolm McIvor wrote about W & J Mossop's department store in Grange, and this article continues the story for the next 60 years.

Thomas Davidson Smith (whom I shall call T. D.) was born on 10 October, 1838, in Over Houses Farm in the Hindburn valley above Wray, Lancashire, third of five children of farmer John Smith (b.1803) and his wife Margaret (b.1804). In 1842 the Smith family moved to Mealbank farm, Wray, and after early local schooling T. D. was sent to school in Leeds.

In April 1853, at the age of fourteen-and-a half years, T. D. began his career in grocery as an apprentice to William Beckett of 42, Church Street, Lancaster, remaining until his nineteenth birthday on 10 October 1857. Following this long apprenticeship he obtained a position as a general assistant with a wholesale tea and coffee merchant in Bolton, where he stayed until October 1858.

T. D. Smith set up in business in his own account on 12 November 1858, renting a small shop at 15, Penny Street, Lancaster, for £29.00 per annum, and living in a small cottage behind the shop in Frances Passage. His business was T. D. Smiths (without the apostrophe), tea blenders, grocers and provision merchants. T. D. Smiths Ltd. was to become a regional grocery shop empire, with six suburban branches in Lancaster, and at Market Square, Settle, and at Main Street, Grange-over-Sands.

By 1861 T. D. was an un-married 22-years-old, living with his unmarried sister Jane (b.1837) in Penny Street [although the 1861 Census says 7 Croft Street, but there is no Croft Street in Lancaster], but in 1862 he married a cousin, Mary Corrie Gorrill (b.1842). By the time of the 1871 Census T. D. and Mary were living in the Frances Passage property [but Census says Penny Street] with four children: their first child, Margaret Ellen, was

b.1863 but died 6 weeks later. Next was John William Smith (1864-1926, becoming Professor of Surgery at Manchester); a third child was born and died in 1866; then there was Edward Gorrill Smith (1867-1948). He was followed by Mary Evelyn “Eva” Smith (1868-1950) and Francis “Frank” Joseph Smith (1870-1919), who emigrated to South Africa and became a prosperous farmer.

As a result of the failure of the Preston Bank T. D. was able to buy his rented property in August 1867, but facing difficulties to trade due to the ‘monopolists’ of local, larger, businesses such as H. R. Preston of Church Street, T. D. began to trade with the close-knit, middle-class religious and farming community (of which his family were a part) within the hinterland of Lancaster, delivering to farms outside an 8-mile radius of the city, to such an extent that by 1878 his delivery network extended to Settle, Carnforth and Grange. T. D. Smiths Ltd. prided themselves for their personal delivery service: the growth and practice of multiples was anathema to Smiths.

In 1871 the shop extended into the former Frances Passage/Road property and the family moved to 3, The Vineyards, Greaves, Lancaster, then in 1875 they moved to Hermon House (now Victoria House) on the corner of Regent Street (to the west of Penny Street) and Lindow Square, a house designed for the Smiths by a friend employed by the prestigious local architectural practice of Paley & Austin.

About 1880 T. D. purchased the adjacent 17-19 Penny Street property which had previously belonged to the failed shoe-making firm of his cousin’s widow, S. A. Gorrill & Son, and the premises continued to be modernised until the business closed in 1961.

By 1882 T. D. was employing 10 men and 3 boys in his Penny Street business and his family had grown with five additional children (Arthur died as an infant) - Clara “Carrie” Jane Smith (1872-1914); Margaret Elizabeth “Bessie” Smith (1874-1951); Thomas De Smith (1875-1906, becoming a

teacher); Eleanor Mary Gorrill “Nellie” Smith (1879-1972); and Charles Hermon Smith (1882-1941, Hermon named after the family’s house in Regent Street).

[Census Returns of 1881 and 1891 give differing names for addresses - Harmon House/Hermon House/Kermon House/Lindow House/Lindow Terrace and Regent Street/South Regent Street - but probably relate to the same property, and the name for Carrie/Clarrie/Corrie Smith also differ, probably due to misrepresentation of signatures, although T. D’s. wife Mary Gorrill had Corrie as her second name.]

T. D. and his son Edward Gorrill were instrumental in forming the Lancaster Grocers’ & Provision Merchants Association in 1897, and following the establishment in 1891 of the Federation of Grocers’ Associations of the United Kingdom, Edward held various committee posts and was President 1932-33. Edward became a borough magistrate in 1913, a county magistrate in 1930, only retiring in 1943 on his 75th birthday. An ardent Liberal, he served on Lancaster council from 1916 and was Mayor 1928-29.

By 1901 only the four daughters of T. D. and Mary Smith were still living with their parents - three had become Sunday School teachers, while the eldest, Mary Evelyn “Eva” was the firm’s business cashier and book-keeper, and all remained unmarried: the family were supported by a housemaid and a kitchenmaid. Such was the makeup of family and business life that the sisters rarely had time to socialise outside their family circle: finding suitable suitors was difficult.

The Smith family retained strong links with their Methodist upbringing. Not only had T. D’s. daughters become Sunday School teachers, but T. D. who himself had been a Sunday School teacher by the age of 21, in 1869 was elected Superintendent of the Wesleyan Methodist Chapel in Sulyard Street, Lancaster, for an 8-year period.

Edward Gorrill Smith had joined the firm as a fifteen-year-old in 1882, became a junior partner with his father in 1892 and a joint partner in 1901 when he took over the active management of the firm, allowing his father, whose health was failing badly, to retire to a new home at Moor Platt, Caton, in 1902.

Charles Harmon Smith, the fifth and youngest son, became assistant manager, also in 1901, and a joint partner in 1906, and by 1911 he and his mother, sisters Clara and Eleanor were living at Havercroft, Lancaster.

T. D. himself died in 1906 (he is buried in Lancaster Cemetery) leaving Edward Gorrill and Charles Harmon to run the business, the family succession continuing when T. D's. grandson, Francis Brian Smith, son of Edward Gorrill and his first wife, entered the business in 1915 and took over as director in 1924.

In 1925 the firm of T. D. Smith Ltd. took over the old-established business of W. & A. Mossop in Main Street, Grange, changing its name but operating under the SPAR franchise, as it still does today. In 1927 Smiths acquired Crossfields of Arnside, but it continued to trade under that name, and in 1930 they opened a store in Settle, on the corner of Cheapside and Duke Street.

By the 1950's the pace of retail change was quickening - rationing was ending, price competition from multiples such as Lipton's, Home & Colonial and the Co-Op was growing, traditional labour-intensive services were reducing, and there was less need for home delivery services due to the development of supermarkets. These factors, together with Francis Brian Smith's failing health in the late 1950's, caused the closure of three of Smiths Lancaster branches and for Francis to retire in September 1960. The firm's principal Lancaster premises closed in 1961 - its famous trade sign, a large green kettle, was donated to the Lancaster City Museum, where it still hangs today in the fanlight above the front door. The shop was sold to

Greenwood's, the hosiery and outfitting specialists, who passed on much of the business to the Co-op, a movement which the Smiths had sought to avoid throughout their trading life at all costs.

In March 1953 twenty-nine-years-old James Walter Ross (1923-1998) started working for T. D. Smith Ltd. at their Settle branch as assistant at the wage of £6 6s 0d a week. In 1957 he moved to the Grange premises as Manager. The business became under his ownership in May 1966 and he transformed the business into a self-service store, doing away with the traditional Smith method of customer service.

James Ross and his family - wife Eileen, son Ian and daughter Heather - lived at Walmer, Kirkhead Road, Kents Bank, and all worked in the shop at different times together, along with some family friends, and when the business was sold to James in 1966 all four family members were partners in the business.

James Ross retired in May 1985 and the business was taken over by William Chalmers and family who had retired to the UK from Canada.

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Sources:

Official Guide to Grange-over-Sands 1930

Grange 'Little Red Book' 1932

Millom News, Friday 19 December 1969, pages 19-23 advertising feature.

A Traditional Grocer: T. D. Smith's of Lancaster, 1858-1981 by Jayne Broome and others, edited by Michael Winstanley. Centre for North-West Regional Studies, University of Lancaster, 1991. (Local Studies Library, ReferenceSection, Lancaster City Library, Ref: LM81/TRA)