

Castle Markets Project - Oral History

Interview Transcript

Interviewee Details

Name: John Colley

ID Number: CM_057_Colley

Place of Birth: Sheffield

Year / Date of Birth: 1941

Interview Details

Interviewer: Hannah Baxter

Date / Time:

Place:

Transcript

Hannah: So firstly could you tell me what your name is, what year you were born in and where you were born?

John: Right. My name is John Colley. I was born in 1941, during the war, and I was born in the house which was up Ecclesall Road, Sheffield.

Hannah: And could you tell me what your stall sells and how long you've had the stall for?

John: Well, we're booksellers. I took over the stall when my father died suddenly in the late 60s, 1960s. There had to be a space of time before I took over, before I was allowed to take over for the contracts to go through, apparently, but I took over more or less straight away after my father died and I've been doing it ever since.

1.04 Hannah: So what sort of books do you sell?

John: All sorts. Children's. The times have changed now but we used to sell lots and lots of colouring books and at Christmas time the big input was the Christmas Annuals, which in those days was Dandy and Beano and Bunty, Eagle for the boys, all the Christmas Annuals. Which were then if I remember starting out about five shillings a time, perhaps even less.

Hannah: Yeah.

John: And then, that was one side of the stall, on the other side of the stall was paperbacks and magazines, plus comics. Comics were one of our biggest lines, the old American comics, which I wish I'd have kept hold of some of them cos they'd be worth a fortune nowadays, the early Superman and Batman American comics, Marvel comics, we used to sell hundreds a week of those American comics. The only, of course buying books is a leisurely business, if I remember correctly the only

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time we ever had a queue waiting to be served at my stall was for the output of Lady Chatterley's Lover, which was the Penguin paperback which caused such a reaction, and that was the only time we've ever had a queue. I think it must have sold almost a hundred on the very first day of publication and it was, I can remember, in the old Penguin orange and white covers and I'm sure it was priced either 2/6 or 3/6, I think it was 3 shillings and sixpence. That was a long time ago.

Hannah: Did you read it?

John: No I didn't read it, no. I was more into Westerns, cowboy books!

Hannah: With you talking about children's books just before I thought you were going to say it was when Harry Potter came out, that you had a queue, so Lady Chatterley took me by surprise!

John: Yes! That was the diversity of either side of the stall, one side was all the Dandy and Beano and colouring books and sticker books and things like that, and we had comics and magazines across the front - the American comics - and then at the other side we had the paperbacks and magazines.

3.47 Hannah: So did you get children coming in after school?

John: Not very often. Cos that was the winding up time here, the winding...in those days it was only three days trading - Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Of course, Saturdays was the day we sold more children's books and comics, that was when the children were off school, so it was quite a change, personally, from Tuesday and Friday, to our far and away the busiest day Saturdays cos of the children. The big change then I think came when lots and lots of people will remember us from, the day they started bringing pop magazines out in the days then, things like the Beatles Monthly and Rolling Stones magazines, and Donny Osmond's, the Osmonds, and they used to open out some of them into photos of Donny Osmond, etc. and I used to pin them up open behind the stall and we sold lots and lots of those - Donny Osmond, David Cassidy, the Beatles, David Bowie, David Essex and perhaps the biggest of all was the Bruce Lee karate/kung fu magazines which I used to sell possibly 200 plus a month. That was the real craze in those days. One year we had all the young girls apparently were queuing at the City Hall up town for tickets to see the Bay City Rollers, which were the current craze and luckily on that weekend I had a Bay City Roller magazine that opened out into a giant picture of the pop group so first thing in the morning the tickets went on sale and all the girls heard that there was a picture for sale in a magazine down at the market and I was inundated by school girls buying this magazine. I sold out in less than two hours of the Bay City Rollers. So ever since then I've been a Bay City Roller fan. [Laughs] I think that must have been the 70s.

6.45 Hannah: So were the girls dressed up as well? Cos they used to put extra bits of tartan on their clothes and things, didn't they?

John: Oh in those days they had tartan scarves, yeah, tartan trousers, yeah, yeah. Crazy times.

Hannah: So at that time you were in the Rag and Tag market?

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John: No, at that time we were in the Sheaf, that was in the Sheaf market. And then all these crazes selling little novelties, the craze after that began the fancy rubber heads - that sounds strange - but on the end of your pencil you had a fancy rubber head probably in the shape of a little policeman or a little fireman or then a piece of fruit and the kids were crazy collecting all these rubbers and on a Saturday I'd sell, we used to sell hundreds upon hundreds out of little boxes just for the pencils or the pencil tops. So that was a real craze.

Hannah: So was that in the 70s?

John: No maybe that was into the 80s, maybe in the 80s. That was just before the next craze which was the Rubix cube. I used to sell lots and lots of the Rubix cube. That was the craze. That got us by for a lot more years. But the sort of mainline which was paperback books got sort of cast aside! [Laughs] So we really became known as the children's, the sort of children's stall. Which I had half and half. Then like I say the Sheaf market began to be run down and they began to move us all into one place for the convenience, I think the Sheaf market they wanted the building for either office or carparks or whatever. We were moved across to share this Castle Market building which will be about the late 1990s we came across here and we've been here ever since.

9.03 Hannah: So was there a lot of traders moved at that time?

John: Quite a few, yes, yes, quite a few were packed up. Because here basically is the meat and fish, which predominantly is meat and fish, and butchers and the fish merchants, and of course your other trades didn't, because of the hygiene, weren't allowed in there which they are now I'm afraid, which doesn't go down well with a lot of people. In those days it had to be food in there. Now it isn't. It hasn't changed for the better.

Hannah: So could you tell me how your grandad had the stall to begin with?

John: My grandfather I never knew. When he first started in the 1920s and 30s, my father was one of three sons and the other two went into the steelworks, the Sheffield steelworks, and my father was the one who carried on with the business from his father. So as I say I never knew my grandfather. I was born in '41 while my father was in the forces. He never went abroad, I think he stayed in Scotland.

10.33 Hannah: So did you say your grandad started in a shop?

John: My grandfather had a shop on Scotland Street, which was a lot of Jewish, early Jewish traders, selling all the nylons, and nightdresses, and towels. We really were surrounded by old Jewish traders which we became very friendly with. And that would be the 40s and 50s when I was just a nipper. So I can't remember too much about the 40s.

Hannah: So when you were a child did you help out your father?

John: As soon as I was independent enough to come down from school, I went to Hunters Bar school, as soon as I was old enough to sort of make my way down, cos after standing, the old Rag

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and Tag was outdoors and in the winter my father could hardly walk home after the cold, terrible stood all day in the open air in the cold. So we used to go to, there were no cars then we didn't have a car, we used to go in the nearest pub which was on Dixon Lane in sheffield which is still there now, the little Dixon Lane, and my father had to have a hot barley wine which in those days was the current drink which brought you round, probabky the equivalent of Scotch today, malt whisky, it was called Barley Wine and that used to warm us up and I remember stood at the entrance while he sat down and had his hot drink for half an hour before we walked to the bus stop to catch the bus home, which would probbakly then be about six or seven o'clock in the evening.

12.35 Hannah: So did you have to take all the books and stock home with you?

John: No, we had a little warehouse which was at the side of the pet shop, the big pet shop Oggleys which us on the photos there, we had a little stable at the back of there. And we used to havr to pack the books away off the stall every night into these boxes, push them down into our warehouse, lock the warehouse up and go home. As I say then it was just the Tuesday, the Friday and the Saturday. we'd come early in the morning, unlock the warehouse and push the boxes back up to the stall. The council market workers would then put you two trestles up and wooden planks across the top and you displayed the stall how you though appropriate.

Hannah: yeah. So on the days when you weren't working on that stall did you have a stall anywhere else?

John: No, no, we just did the three days then. In those days my father had to go up on the train to the big places then to the wholesale to buy the stuff - Manchester and Leeds, espeically Manchester. he used to go on the train to Manchester, order the stuff and it would be delivered to our house more often than not and brought back you see, then we took it down to the city centre market as best as we could. Things started to changing then after the 50s when we got our first car, a little Morris Minor, and then we could bring a little more stuff down and by then as I say, my father died suddenly at the age of 64, I was in my 20s. So I from then, I took over, and it wasn't too long before then we were transferred to the Sheaf which was an entirely different set up, that became a five day market. And it's been that way ever since. Five day market. I had that set out, of course things were set out different then, just a case of trial and error. I was a young man and my father wouldn't have had anything to do with pop cultures and pop magaiznes and that but that kept us going more and more.

Hannah: Yeah it sounds like it worked.

John: Yeah and of course nowadays as technology's gone out the children's colouring books have gone and the Dandy/Beano Annuals are basically gone, everyone's playing their gadgets now. Things have changed.

15.38 Hannah: Is there something you like best about your job?

John: As of now?

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hannah: Yeah, at the moment.

John: Not really. Things changed when I got married, I married the wife, in oh crikey, 80ish I think, 1980. 1980. And she packed her job up, of course, and came into the market with me, and she really has kept the business going because I think most of the people who read are women, women tend to read, and so she's been able to chit chat more and being a big reader herself it became an interest as a hobby and as the children's section changed we did more and more then of reading, especially women's books, still the most popular being the old Mills and Boon, romance and the Catherine Cookson type books. and as some people probably know, we've become very friendly and she won the shopkeeper personality of the year just a few years back with her photo in the local Star and the interviews and she received a trophy and one of our customers who recommended her received a cash prize. And I think as the business is still going is entirely due to my wife and daughter. Nowadays, being 70, I'm still taking a backseat, i do the invoices and the office work.

17.38 Hannah: Do you think your daughter will continue it?

John My daughter, I almost said unfortunately, has just had a little baby so he's now her pride and joy, but I think my wife and daughter hope to carry on as they are. So more or less that is about it. We shall just have to see how this new market goes - or they will jst have to see how this market goes [Laughs] But I'm sure being so good at the job and knowing books as they do I feel confident they'll make a success of it. I shalln't be here then I don't think

Hannah: Is there anything else you want to add?

John: I don't think so, i think if there's anything else I can think of that you'd find interesting...

Hannah: Okay thank you very much. Thank you.