



H BOORMAN & Co

H Boorman & Co was situated at 2 and 4 West Cross, at the west end of Tenterden High Street. The shop which could have been regarded as the 'Harrods of the Weald' was situated in 18th century buildings which were nearly all demolished about 1977 except for that part now run by the Orvis store. The rest of the site was then redeveloped into what is now known as Caxton Close. The business, founded in 1819 by Mr Samuel Boorman, rapidly prospered and expanded under his son Henry's control.



At various times the firm had branches in Headcorn, Benenden, Smarden, Appledore, Wittersham, Bethersden, Rolvenden and Iden Green. 'Value for Money' was the company motto and at its peak employed some 40 people, some of whom lived on the premises. They served everything from a bag of sugar to a hat, ran a horse drawn funeral service and could completely furnish your home. The business survived for 153 years before closing in February 1973. In the last week shoppers were able to buy groceries at ten per cent less whilst there was an auction of the contents of the drapery and furnishing departments.



At the time of its closure all the branches had closed and the firm had roughly 20 employees. In 1973 most of the commercial activity of the town was at the other end of the town and another factor in its closure was because people were becoming more mobile and shopping in towns further a field which had a greater variety of shops.

Lucy Joan Relf (née Morris 17 July 1918 - 8 November 2010) has written about working at Boormans from 1937 to 1943. Lucy says:

“At the approach of my 19th birthday I managed to persuade my parents to let me take a job, preferably in an office. The manager of the then Boorman's store at Smarden needed someone to do part time office work, so I applied, with the option that if suitable I would be considered for a post at the main store in Tenterden. However, in 1937 the Boorman's store at Smarden was a busy one selling groceries, haberdashery, millinery and gowns, as well as the usual commodities for the household – kitchenware, brooms, paraffin, etc. At Christmas the children would crowd around the windows, decorated and filled with Christmas gifts; one window was always full of toys, books, etc and often I have stood looking at the colourful display – my main interest was books. However, my period at Smarden did not last many weeks – spent mainly copying from grocery docketts the list of items purchased by one customer, in particular, who was disputing the account during one whole year (sent previously by the manager). This was a laborious task, the items and prices had to be written in a 'Grocery Book' and sent to the customer – whether the account was ever settled, I cannot remember! The manager from Tenterden used to visit the branch every Monday. Anyway, the upshot of it

was that I was offered a job at Tenterden in the office for 2/6d (two shillings and sixpence) per week! I still have the letter. Being a Morris I suppose, I asked for more and I have another letter stating they were willing to take me on one month's trial at 5/- per week.

And so I began in July 1937 cycling every day to arrive at 8.15 am for work at 8.30 am. This meant leaving home about 7.45 am. I mainly used the bye-roads and came out the Man of Kent (now Raja Indian Restaurant on the Biddenden Road at St Michaels). On Wednesdays we closed at 1 pm but the other weekdays were 5.30 pm (often later) with Saturdays being 8am to 8 pm. I can remember arriving home dead beat. Great was the excitement prior to starting the job. I made a navy blue skirt and bolero and two silky blouses – one blue, one pink! There were no lightweight, weatherproof clothes in those days. My outer garb consisted of a blue (dark) gabardine raincoat and a separate waterproof cape that I carried in my saddle bag for really bad weather. A number of times I had to buy new pants and stockings because I was wet through. During the winter when there were heavy falls of snow, I would take my cycle and walk to Frittenden Road Station (now extinct on the old Kent and East Sussex Railway) and catch the steam train to Tenterden. Once I remember it was so late I decided I must walk. However as I approached Biddenden the train pulled up at the station there. Another time as I was walking towards Biddenden the mail van gave me a lift. On some occasions, when it snowed, I walked through the back roads pushing my cycle so I could perhaps ride once I reached the main roads. There was very little traffic in those days, everyone cycled to work and we would meet up with one another along the way, sometimes as many as eight or ten of us. The walks through the lanes were eerie, drifts were quite usual and often, as no one had been through, I had to 'blaze a trail' so as to speak. I remember once the cold overcame me and a kind lady took me in and gave me a hot drink before I continued. Often I have gone sprawling one way, my bike the other in Tenterden High Street. They used horse drawn snow ploughs then - large, strong wooden V shaped contraptions, fairly wide at the open end which made a clear opening in the snow on the road.

Now the actual Boormans store was huge with many plate glass windows and it occupied a long stretch of the pavement at the bottom end of the town, known as West Cross. It was built of brick and looked Victorian. Except for the part that housed the furnishing department, which was retained as a shop, the rest was pulled down and is now Caxton Close. It was a large, rambling old building, the actual shop on the ground floor and the upper stories having stock rooms, offices and 'rest' rooms. There was also a huge warehouse at the back of the premises. The largest department was furnishing which had carpets, bedding, furniture for every room of a house, crockery, pans, etc.

Saturday nights were the worst. Quite often hundreds of pounds had been taken and late at night it was no fun trying to get the money to total. Eventually I hit on the idea of doing a sub-total about 6 pm which was much easier. The furniture department had both a double and a large single display window. Next door was the underwear and baby linen department with a large section at the end for dresses. A stairway led to the millinery department which shared a window with dresses. The manageress, Mrs Larthe, had been a one time 'boarder' and had had several girls working under her making hats. During my stay however she had one assistant but was still clever with her hands making a mould or a hat and some of her decorations of artificial flowers were outstanding. Next door to the underwear department was more or less the centre of the store. Here the main door opened to counters and display cubicles each side, one counter for hosiery, haberdashery and the other for household linen and fabrics. Tucked in amongst all this and next to an open archway to the grocery store was the cash desk or 'front office' as we knew it. Many hours of my life have been spent there since all the money and dockets were brought here by the assistants from the departments previously mentioned, apart from the furnishing and dress departments which had their own tills.

Later I ran the main office on the same floor which dealt with the payments of monthly accounts, club cards and grocery books. Here, there was a busy switchboard and a hatch opened on to the rear of the grocery department, through which we could talk to the young grocers and they could pass us biscuits, etc. As well as the switchboard there were also the remains of a previous method of communication to all departments and offices, namely a 'blower'. This was a long covered tube (not unlike a vacuum cleaner hose) that hung in one corner with a stopper in it - more like a whistle really. So when the person at the other end blew into the pipe, there was a piercing whistle emitted in the office. Sometimes, if lines were engaged or the phones were out of order, this method was used to get through to me.

Pens and ink were used or a fountain pen –no biros then. Also the typewriter was shared among all the offices as was the adding machine, operated by pulling a handle down each time figures were entered by pressing buttons. As this often meant climbing stairs along corridors to get it from the 'top office', I relied chiefly on

my own addition. Typewriters were used only for letters and 'special' accounts. All other bookkeeping was done by sitting on a stool and writing into tome like ledgers. Just outside the accounts office was a very elegant looking wide flight of stairs. These led to the Managing Director's office, the area beyond which was entirely filled with dress fabrics and paper patterns. This is where my friend Edie worked. The shop assistants were required to wear dark green dresses, whilst the office staff usually wore some shade of green which did give one a choice. At this time I made all my dresses as did most other girls. I wore green suede court shoes and Miss Allcorn of Haberdashery sold me some red (tomato) silk stockings.

The Hosiery and Millinery Departments shared a double display window with Gowns and also had the window the other side of the main door. The Grocery Department had a separate entrance door. Two of the six grocery staff were out most mornings cycling round to collect orders from customers. The area covered included Tenterden, Smallhythe, Leigh Green, Rolvenden, Biddenden and part of High Halden with each area having its specific days. Tuesday and Thursday were the biggest round days. The very outlying farms were visited about once a fortnight. The rounds men took with them a pad of order dockets, a receipt book and change. On their return the money and receipts were handed into the office and the dockets used to price and 'get-up' the goods which were delivered the following day either by an errand boy riding a 'trade' bicycle or by van.

Next to the Boots and Shoes was the Men's Wear. Everything was obtainable from working flannelette shirts to smart, well designed suits as well as Panama hats for the summer. I remember Mr Seymore of Men's Wear flicking flies off the white jackets with a rubber band. Finally, we come to the Bargain Basement. This was a room tucked under the main staircase. It was really like mini Woolworths (as they were in those days – nothing over sixpence) and anything, almost, was displayed here. Children loved it; they came in on Saturdays for pens, pencils, books and toys, whilst their mothers bought oddments for the home.

A large shed stood at the back of the store to house all the cycles. Only the manager, Mr Allen, drove a car and even he also often cycled. I can see him now with dark trilby and a grey, well cut suit with watch chain across waistcoat. By the time he came through my office he was removing his trouser clips. He was always in a hurry and seemed old to me then but I imagine he was only in his forties. An older man, who was a director of the firm, had his office upstairs at the front of the shop; this was reached via a back stairs and numerous corridors amongst the fixtures of drapery stock. I was never too happy making this journey as one never knew who might one encounter! The drapery accounts office was also housed on this floor. These were paid into my office but were sent out from here. So, if there were any queries it entailed a great deal of running to and fro. I learned a great deal about life whilst working there, made many friends, but also realised just how jealous and catty some women can be. I had not encountered it before – in fact, I grew up.

All this was before the War. In 1939 changes began with the declaration of War. Some of the assistants that belonged to the ATC or the Territorials were called up. Ration books and coupons came on the scene making much more work with fewer hands. Planes came over dropping incendiaries and fire fighting groups were organised by all the larger stores. Boormans had to patrol the lower end of the town on a rota. About five people were required, three men and two girls, for a patrol. Whatever good we could have done I shudder to think! The room we used as our base was right on top of the store. With wooden stairs a veritable death trap if ever there was one. The men usually went on patrol whilst the girls cooked a sumptuous supper usually with (unbeknown to the manager) items supplied by the grocers. On one such occasion I remember, we were settling down to a good meal of tinned salmon, cucumber, all the trimmings, wine and a sing-song, when the manager who was Officer-in-Charge paid a surprise visit. It was slightly embarrassing; but he could hardly complain - it was hard enough to recruit staff to stay overnight after a day's work. I can remember how 'green' I felt the next day.

At first, when the air raid sounded, we sheltered in the huge cellars where the large, round cheeses were kept together with wine. There was always a bottle opened and shared round in such times – I cannot imagine how the stock taking figures came out! Wine was also available from the Grocery Department. They were happy days and I cannot remember any smutty talk by the men in front of the girls. We were treated with respect. Neither can I recall swearing – so different from today. Of course we had our jokes and flirtations – but all harmless.

Dances were held in Tenterden Town Hall, usually on a Wednesday, and I have often cycled back there after returning to Smarden after work. Often there would be a whole crowd of us meeting up and cycling through the back roads. The dances were usually the old time ones, like the Lancers, Quadrilles, etc and pretty

boisterous they were too! Long dresses were usually worn and this either meant changing on arrival or hitching the dress up. On really special occasions or very late dances, a group of us would hire a taxi and on other occasions I would spend the night at the home of a girl workmate. There were no real air raids although bombers passed over. It was always assumed they used Tenterden Church as a landmark as it was visible by air from the coast. Therefore they were unlikely to deliberately drop bombs near it. The only danger was that if they were turned back from their target they might jettison their load before crossing the coastline. The air raid warning would sound but as folk felt they were as safe in one place as another little notice was taken. I remember once after having been to 'the pictures' (a film) at the Embassy, now M&Co, being told there had been quite heavy air activity, although, we had heard nothing.

Eventually, due to the frequency of air raids and the winter weather, I was offered lodgings by two girls that worked with me. Thus I resided at 61 High Street, Tenterden, where the Midland Bank (now HSBC Bank) was built after the houses were pulled down in the 1950s. I stayed Monday and Tuesday nights then home Wednesday, unless conditions were bad. I then stayed again on Thursday and Friday. Saturday was midday meal only and then home at night. Thus began a new phase in my life.



59 and 61 High Street, next to White Lion Hotel

The family that I stayed with were strict chapel goers and the father a strict chapel disciplinarian. They were very kind to me. There had been eight in the family, two were married and an elder daughter kept house as the mother had died young. Two of the girls, Peggy and Margaret, worked at Boormans. Grace was always said at every meal. Linen napkins and starched white tablecloths were used – must have been hard work keeping house. On one occasion I remember there was a heavy fall of snow during the day and another girl that cycled in from Bethersden was invited to stay the night at No 61, providing I did not mind sharing my bed. As she was a pal of mine this was no problem. We decided to spend the evening at the Embassy cinema where Will Hay in 'Oh, Mr Porter!' was on. This was quite a giggle and Edie and I arrived back in high spirits. The family had retired to bed and we had previously been asked not to make a noise as father was feeling unwell. Of course we had a fit of giggles and once in the bedroom I asked Edie if she could 'peck oats' (this entailed lying on the floor and putting both legs back over the shoulders and tapping the floor with your toes) and in an attempt to show her how it was done I managed to get my legs half way up when I exploded with laughter and both feet went down with a bang! We froze and then heard one of the girls pass along the landing to see if their father was all right. Edie and I dived under the bed daring not to breathe!

On one occasion during May Fair Day at Tenterden I remember walking up the town with Edie during lunch hour and visiting the fair. Animals were penned in what is now the recreation ground and various traders had market stalls. We met a number of Smarden farmer's sons there! Most flocks and herds were driven through the town. However, the army was taking over, large houses were requisitioned and for a while some soldiers were billeted in private houses – I can remember two at 61 High Street. The mood of the town was changing.

Having been at Boormans for nearly six years I began to get itchy feet. Many of my workmates were being called up leaving a decreasing staff – but the work did not. Finally, I decided that I had had enough and felt a strong inclination to volunteer for the Women's Land Army (WLA). After being shut up in an office I felt I wanted to get outside, However when I broached the subject to the Managing Director I was informed that he had applied for exemption from call up for me as I was in a key job. This did not please me at all as he had not discussed this with me and when I proved stubborn offered me a substantial rise in wages. But to me they had left it too late. The upshot of it was that I joined the WLA."

Reference

Lucy's Story by Lucy Joan Relf (née Morris)

Jack Gillett