

Dodgy Scales and Delivering the Mail – Mike Fogg

April 2024

Our speaker arrived hot foot from South Woodham Ferrers after battling his way through the Dengie road works and traffic lights.

Mike is a historian whose interest in local history was kindled when he was a volunteer researcher at the Essex Records Office in Chelmsford. One of his tasks was to listen to and catalogue the spoken words of an Ernest Poole who had plotted the retail evolution and changes of Chelmsford High Street. For an example Mike mentioned tripe – when he was a lad he could remember two tripe shops but now it is rarely seen in butchers windows. (Never really fancied it myself...) It made Mike realise how much has changed in his local community; the humble beginnings of Woodham shops and post offices, their owners, their deeds and their antics!

For those of us who only know the geography of ASDA (and now Sainsbury's), Woodham Ferrers (WF) is at the top of the hill and South Woodham (SWF) is at the bottom of the hill.

Undertaking the historical research – the earliest found being 1234 – for both South Woodham Ferrers and Woodham Ferrers, Mike has collated a vast amount of data and documents using many sources:

- British Newspaper Archives
- Essex Records Office
- Programmes of produce shows
- Newspapers
- Old Deeds
- Local people and relatives.

Mike showed us street layouts of WF businesses starting at 1845, plotting a steady demise until in 2000 many shops had gone, including all the grocery outlets, with only one pub – The Bell – remaining. But with the railway running at the bottom of the hill many shop owners at Woodham moved down and from 1901 until the 1960s the retail trades in South Woodham grew until the 70s, when there was a decline in growth, a trend that has continued.

Corruption is nothing new and Mike told us the tale of Charles Bornes – a shop owner – who was fined countless times for attaching lead weights to the scales and incorrect or short measures. Mind you, punishments were quite severe – for fixing the scales Charles was fined £2 2/6 (for our younger readers' £2.12½p approx.!). In today's money, that's £304! A thief who stole a loin of pork was given 6 months' hard labour and a burglar 10 years' transportation. Hard times!

Mike took us through some of the crimes and infamy that he had discovered through his research. A jilted boyfriend – we think – that shot his 14-year-old girlfriend, a possible

suicide or an accidental shooting, a sudden disappearance, a man falling down a 15-foot hole whilst inebriated, repossessions, wife beating by a drunken landlord who despite this was popular enough for a signed petition that kept his licence; and, most sadly, the body of a dead infant wrapped in a parcel and posted.

On a lighter note it was said that *“more beer was drunk in WF than any other two parishes”* and a ‘rather pompous’ weights and measures inspector could not have applied the hand brake to his car as the shop keeper had to point out that the said car was now rolling down the hill.

Many black and white photos were used to illustrate the talk and many of the old shops and public houses are now private homes, some still with butcher’s hooks hanging from the ceiling. An interesting and informative talk.

Judi Embling