

## SANDOWN WOOLWORTH'S R.I.P. 30-12-2008

By Dave Bambrough 2009



The demise of British Woolworth stores has been a great shock to the millions of people that accepted it as the indefeasible British institution that it had become. It had probably never crossed many peoples' minds that one day the whole Woolworth's (Woolies) empire would suddenly collapse like the inevitable house of cards.

Frank Winfield Woolworth a 27 year old sales assistant borrowed \$300 to open his first "five cent" store in New York in 1879, but this soon failed. He then opened another in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1881 about 60 miles away, which quickly reversed the failure of his first shop, becoming an instant success. The formulae that contributed to its prosperity was that it was labelled as the "five and ten" - everything priced at five or ten cents. With his brother Charles they opened a large number of these stores, finally uniting well over 500 and forming the F. W. Woolworth Company in 1911.

He had a great affection for England and believed his formula, the "five and ten" would work across the Atlantic by converting it to "one penny, three penny and sixpenny" with no single article in the store costing over sixpence. This he did and the first store in England was opened in Liverpool on November 5th 1909 with the highest priced single item being 6d. (2½p). (Inflation brought about the end of the three old pence and six old pence price limits during World War II).

A well known national newspaper declared the American upstarts had chosen Liverpool so they could make a quick escape back home from Liverpool Docks once their venture failed, leaving their unpaid debts behind them, how wrong they were.

One of the most memorable aspects of the early Woolworth's, apart from the rows of counters and the neat,



A typical layout of a Woolworth's store for those old enough to remember. Note the 3d & 6d prices.

well-displayed stock, was the parquet flooring.

They even had their own record label, Embassy Records, versions of current hits produced and manufactured by Oriole Records for F. W. Woolworth & Co.Ltd. from late 1954 until 1965, when the Oriole company was sold to C.B.S.

The company expanded rapidly. In the mid-1920s, it was opening a store every 17 days, to the delight of local councillors

who regarded the arrival of its distinctive red fascia as a stamp of approval for their town. Paradoxically, in the 1970s an average of 15 stores were closed each year to fund the renovation of more modern outlets, but at the start of the 1980s Woolworths still had 1,000 shops open and were beginning to expand into out-of-town locations. Although initially successful the format ultimately failed to catch on and all of these stores were sold or closed down following the acquisition of the business by Kingfisher.

The first self-service shop was opened in 1955 with a gradual conversion from then on until 1971 when it began in earnest with 777 shops being converted from conventional behind-the-counter service to a system of centralized payment points in each shop, where goods could be paid for and wrapped, thus increasing the speed of service.

The British company outlasted its American counterparts because in 1997 the US Woolies, now owned by a rival American retailer, announced it was closing its remaining 400 outlets.

The worst incident to befall Woolworth's was a German V-2 rocket, which fell on a busy branch in New Cross High Street, South East London on November 26, 1944. The building was destroyed, along with a neighbouring Co-operative store, killing more than 160 people, including 15 children.

Fifty years after the opening of the first shop in Liverpool a rumour spread through Sandown in early 1959 that a fifth Woolworth's was coming to the Island and that Sandown High Street was the chosen site. The establishment of a branch of this world wide concern was viewed with mixed feelings amongst the local businessmen, but the majority of them thought that it would be a great step forward, adding to the prosperity of the town.



A typical Woolworth's of the 1950's.

Sir Francis Pittis and Son, Estate Agents of Wilkes Road at the time officially confirmed the rumour during May 1959. The famous firm had acquired three shops in Sandown. No. 31, a café, under the name of Harry Marsh, No. 33, a Confectioners shop, another Harry Marsh outlet and No. 35, Macks, a fancy goods shop. The two shops either side of the impending store were No. 29, Harvey Warder's Shoe shop, and an empty shop, No. 37, that had recently been vacated by H. J. Daniels who had run a Fruiter & Florists business there and had transferred his business to St. John's Road.

Construction work on the site was well under way by early 1960 when the empty shop formerly occupied by

H. J. Daniels started to collapse just before midday on Thursday, February 11<sup>th</sup>. The glass window in front of the premises shattered out over the pavement just missing passers by. Ominous cracks appeared in the wall fronting the shop and workmen from the adjacent Woolworth site took emergency precautions to shore up the shop and the sidewall. This proved unsatisfactory when it collapsed the next day. Timber beams and supports were used to shore up temporarily the rest of the shop. A guard of police officers and A. A. patrolmen were on duty until Friday morning when the road was re-opened after a safety fence had been erected in front of the damaged shop. Sandown Woolworth's opened later that year with the original telephone number being 1043 and became part of Sandown High Street until 30<sup>th</sup> December 2008.

Like a cricketers worse nightmare, Woolworth's failed to make 100, (years) falling short by eleven months and the Sandown Branch failed to record 50, (years) by twelve months.



Still retaining the F.W. in the title in 1984, despite being taken over in 1982 and becoming Woolworth Holdings. Changing to "Woolworths" was in place by 1985. Photo courtesy of Margaret Back.

In the picture above, note the new looking bricks required to rebuild the shop that collapsed.