

EDDOLLS IN ALRESFORD

by

Lesley Drew.

One hundred years ago, Charles Eddolls brought his bride-to-be from London; to his home town of Alresford. They were married in the parish church of St. John the Baptist on 5th April 1893, and a week later Charles and Jessie became joint managers of the Broad Street General Drapers. Their combined wage, was £2.17s.6d. a week, plus rent free accommodation above the shop.

Charles Eddolls was born in Alresford on 28 December 1867, one of a family of eleven children. Father, the 'black sheep' of a Wiltshire farming family had been educated at Marlborough. He had halfheartedly tried farming, became an Alresford policeman, and eventually descended to being little more than a wastrel. It may be that his apathy to work inspired in his children the opposite attitude. Five sons of the family were to eventually become respected business men in Alresford, a butcher, baker, builder, saddler and draper.

At 13 years, and with just two shillings and sixpence in his pocket, Charles Eddolls left Alresford for London, where he became apprenticed to a draper. Jessie was also an apprentice, after having been brought up in the Drapers Homes for Orphans.

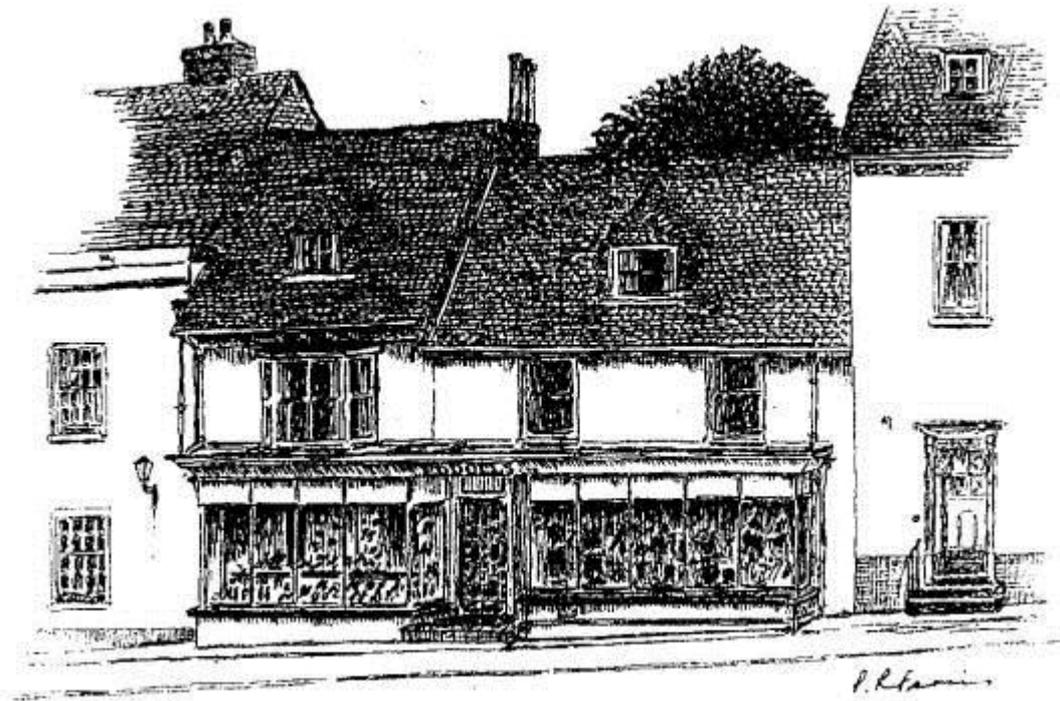
The Broad Street General Drapers store was one of three in the town when the young couple took on the managership. It was owned, by Robert Shaw who had purchased the business in 1880 from its founder, Henry Barratt who opened the store in 1868. Still only 28 years old, in March 1896, Charles Eddolls agreed to purchase the store from Robert Shaw for a total sum of £671. plus £100 for goodwill, fixtures and fittings, and £571 for stock. He paid a deposit of: £335.10s.0d, and the balance, plus £164. 10s.0d. interest, was to be paid off within five years. Any money outstanding after that would be charged, a phenomenal interest rate of 25%.

The service offered by Eddolls of Alresford was not just for customers who called. There was a daily home call, when goods were taken to the outlying areas by pony and cart and later by van. The recorded costs for this service for 1921 were £43. 11s. 6d for pony food and £2.8s.2d for harness repairs. There was also a mourning service. Eddolls would call on a bereaved family and measure all the members. An order would be posted to a London warehouse and the goods would be received by train in time for the funeral. This practice continued up until the last war.

Eddolls also supplied the large estates with their Keepers suits, and the fire service with their uniforms. The store in fact claimed to dress the people from birth to the grave - christening robes to coffin liners.

Neither of the World Wars caused the store to close, despite the fact that Eddolls lost their entire staff to war service in 1939. The only reported closure of business was in 1919 when from 22 February until 7 March every single member of staff was suffering the killer Spanish 'flu. Happily they all survived.

Charles and Jessie had two sons, both born in the living quarters over the store. Both entered the business at the age of 20, Cyril in 1920 and Raleigh in 1925. They were joint managers in 1928 when Charles decided to retire at sixty.



Cyril and Raleigh updated the premises in 1932 by having electricity installed and built an extension in 1934. In 1937 Eddolls became one of the first businesses in town to have a telephone. A year later, Eddolls became a limited company with the brothers as Directors, though Charles had by no means lost interest in the store. He rode his bicycle into town twice weekly just to keep an eye on things, a practice he continued until the age of 83. Even after that he maintained his knowledge of the business until his death in 1960 at the age of 92.

During the second world war, Raleigh remained with Eddolls, unable to join the services because of poor health. As a result, he was able to supervise the fluctuating staff of evacuees and anyone else who offered their services. A great influence in the business at this time, particularly during Raleigh's illnesses, was his wife Evelyn. They kept a very large stock, which proved highly beneficial, when rationing was introduced. The day after an enemy raid, they would go to Southampton and buy up bombed stock.

After the war, Eddolls dealt for a while in second hand clothing, which was 'coupon free'. This had its lighter moments when it came to fitting customers and a few surprises. One customer trying on his 'new' jacket, discovered a roll of dollars in the pocket.

Wendy Eddolls, only child of Raleigh and Evelyn, joined the family business in 1948. Two years later, an ex- navy man, and Alresfordian, Michael Atterton became an employee. Wendy and Michael had known each other since childhood, and they married in 1951.

Cyril died suddenly in 1969, and two years later. Raleigh decided to retire. He also died twelve months later at the age of 66, having lived his entire life over the store in Broad Street.

Michael and Wendy Atterton were already directors with Evelyn Eddolls at the time of Raleigh's death, and the transfer of responsibility had already taken effect.

Although the two rival stores (J. Royale of West Street and E. Barker of Broad Street) of the early years have long since vanished, Eddolls has continued to flourish. Wendy and Michael have brought the store forward into the modern world, whilst still retaining the good old fashioned service which is unlikely to be found in the haberdashery corners of sleek department stores.

Changes have certainly taken place, but these relate mainly to costs and the type of stock. Whereas in 1833 £1285 constituted a great many sales, today it may cover a single item. Heating and lighting costs in 1946 amounted to £28 and that same year the cost of running the delivery van was £59, with rates of £23 to be met!

For sixteen years the store had undertaken a wireless repair and battery charging service, closing down in 1946. Millinery, once a big item, disappeared. Sadly too, in 1991 the unthinkable occurred. The menswear section closed owing to lack of demand. It was, said Wendy, a sign of the times. Big department stores, less formality and a boom in casual clothing.

Though Eddolls no longer act as agents for Wellington boot repairs, wellies remain among their larger orders - few residents go beyond Eddolls to ensure dry feet.

The biggest success story of the Atterton era has been carpeting, which was a natural progression from the linoleum floor covering. The supply area has even extended to the National Exhibition Centre in Birmingham.

Wendy and Michael have shown a progressive attitude in the running of their business, and one aspect has been always to have a member of staff as a director. Thinking in terms of semi-retirement on 1st October 1992 the Attertons passed over the carpet side of the business to their employees Frank Griffin and Ray Brewer, who now trade independently as Eddolls Carpets, operating just as in the past, from the rear of the premises.

Meanwhile it is still possible to buy a yard of elastic or a new cover for a pillow, and whilst Michael and Wendy may be planning on playing a slightly less active role in the daily life of the store, the Charles Eddolls lineage continues. His great grand-daughter Karen, younger daughter of Wendy and Michael, joined the business from school in 1977 and is now in charge of the shoe department, Eddolls remains at heart, a family store. Employees come and in the main, tend not to go. Long service at Eddolls is considered normal. One lady clocked up 49 unbroken years.

There are still customers who remember old Charles Eddolls offering a drop of 'good cheer' in the basement at Christmas. The children and grandchildren of Charles Eddolls' customers now throng into the premises at Christmas time. On Alresford's Christmas Tree Night to be precise. That is the evening when everyone gathers in Broad Street to sing carols, and the local, businesses remain open late. The staff of Eddolls enter very much into the spirit of the occasion, and dress in 'themes'. One year each one of them dressed in the costume of a European country, with Michael Atterton resplendent, as John Bull.

The word 'draper' has disappeared from many of England's towns, but it looks set to survive in Alresford for some time yet.

© Lesley Drew October 1992 Sources Family archives.