

THE SILVER JUBILEE
of
F.G. HOPKINS
Thornbury
1933 - 1958

FOREWORD

When I first started out in business on my own I did not for one moment think it would grow to its present size. Having survived and prospered for something over 25 years, it seemed to me that now was an appropriate time to prepare this booklet, first to commemorate a quarter of a century of steady progress and next to provide in permanent form the detailed history of the growth of the business from its small beginnings to the present time.

Often, as the years slip quickly by, memories of early events fade, old records are lost or thrown away as being of no value and details of the early days of an enterprise are vague or non-existent.

This booklet, then, is an attempt to tell in a simple, straightforward way the story of the business and its steady growth over the past 25 years or so. No one can foresee the future but I hope it will continue to expand and prosper. In the meantime I hope this booklet will be of interest to those who read it and that it may, who knows, at some time in the years to come, be a small part of the history of Thornbury.

Just over a quarter of a century ago a young man of 19, barely out of his apprenticeship to the grocery trade, left his home at Crossways, Thornbury, on his first day of business on his own account. Driving an old secondhand Fiat car laden with his stock, Mr. Francis G. Hopkins set off with the main objective of building up a mobile shop journey. That was on October 30th. 1933. Mr. Hopkins has built so well on that small foundation that he now not only runs three large mobile shops but has a thriving establishment in the heart of Thornbury's shopping centre in High Street and, in addition to the invaluable assistance of Mrs. Hopkins, employs a staff of 12.

Mr. Hopkins, still well on the sunny side of 50, was born on December 5th, 1913 in Gloucester Road, Thornbury. As he was born within the sound of the two clocks - the Church clock and the Town clock - he can, and does, consider himself entitled, with every justification, to be called a Thornburian. Educated at Thornbury Council School under first Mr. Joseph Thomason and later Mr. W. H. Nichols, he missed any chance of a scholarship because he was ill with whooping cough at the time of examination. On leaving school at the age of 14 he was apprenticed to a local company shop and remained with them until he took the fateful decision to branch out for himself five years later.

Serene confidence in himself, good health and a capacity for hard work were Mr. Hopkins's main assets at the start of his business career, for his actual capital amounted to only £11. Two friends, whose confidence was not misplaced, lent him £25 and £30 respectively and with a total capital of £66 Mr. Hopkins bought the old Fiat car, scales, equipment and stock and set up his little shop in the old dairy of his farmhouse home at Crossways. His first visit was to Mrs. B. S. Morse, of Corderies, Alveston. who has remained a satisfied customer to this day.

Taking as his original motto "Service, Civility and Cleanliness" - watchwords which still hold good today - Mr. Hopkins found ready support and the business steadily prospered. However, on one of his early visits to Bristol to purchase stock, he spent his complete capital and vividly remembers standing on the Centre to catch the return bus to Thornbury one Thursday afternoon with only sixpence in his pocket to last him until pay night on Saturday. He kept that sixpence for a good many years but eventually it got mixed in with the rest.

The business proved very successful and within six months Mr. Hopkins bought his first new 10 cwt. van which he fitted as a mobile shop. That served for only about a year before it became quite inadequate and he then purchased a Morris one-tonner which he used until 1937.

Mr. Hopkins continued to carry on his business from Crossways until 1937. On May 17th he married Mrs. Hopkins at Tytherington Church. The same evening he took his bride to their present place of business in High Street, Thornbury, and they opened shop the following morning.

After the shop had been opened in High Street, the one-tonner was found to be quite inadequate and he went on to the 30 cwt. Commer which was used until the end of the war.

Evidence of the growth of population in the area is given by the fact that far from expanding the district covered, Mr. Hopkins has found it necessary to contract it a little. He now covers a district comprising Patchway, Tockington, Almondsbury, Olveston, Aust, Elberton, Littleton, Kington, Cowhill, Oldbury-on-Severn, Hill, Rockhampton, Falfield, Woodford, Stone, Newport, Tytherington, Grovesend, Milbury Heath, Rangeworthy, Bagstone, Iron Acton, Earthcott and Itchington in addition to Thornbury itself. In the early days Mr. Hopkins himself used to travel on Mondays the area from Alveston to Stoke Gifford. Now he has three vans travelling only to Patchway and excluding Stoke Gifford, each doing a full day's work.

Mr. Hopkins recalls that in those pre-war days " I could go to a farm or cottage and sell 41b. of cheese and from that sale I received sufficient profit to buy one gallon petrol, 10 Woodbines, a box of matches and have a 1d change."

Three years after opening the shop in Thornbury World War II started and with it came five very testing years. Mr. Hopkins was called to the Colours on October 17th, 1940 and served with the 2nd Battn. Gloucester Regt. until he was demobbed on October 4th. 1945. A year of his service was spent at Badminton House on Queen Mary's Guard. During that time he became well known to the Duchess of Beaufort who made a point of visiting the shop in High Street to meet Mr. Hopkins again when she had an official engagement in Thornbury two or three years ago.

Mr. Hopkins took part in the " D" Day landings in Normandy and saw active service in France for two months until he was wounded and returned to this country. He was landed at a South of England port, a short journey by ambulance train brought him to one of the local hospitals and after he, and his comrades, had been tucked up comfortably in bed along came a Sister to record their particulars. She assured them that they would all be sent to a hospital as near as possible to their homes so that their relatives could visit them. Within two days hopes rose high as they set off by train for an unknown destination, which in the event turned out to be Carlisle.

"The funny side of it could be seen after it was all over," remarked Mr. Hopkins, " but you needed a sense of humour at times."

Mr. Hopkins was particularly fortunate in his choice of helpmeet, for Mrs. Hopkins took an active interest in the business from the start and it was she who kept it going during the difficult war days in her husband's absence with the Forces. Those difficulties from the beginning of hostilities to the end of rationing seemed at times almost insurmountable but the business managed to carry on. They were fortunate in drawing a good registration - 600 customers - at the start of rationing and that number had grown to 1,000 by the end. The worst year for the business was the one before Mr. Hopkins was demobbed and that was the only one in which they made a small loss.

On his return towards the end of 1945 Mr. Hopkins realised that anything he could get he could sell so he spent practically all his time worrying the Bristol merchants and warehousemen buying up everything he could get hold of and within a few months a great improvement in business was noticeable.

Throughout the years of rationing a fair system of sharing everything in short supply was worked out and this was strictly adhered to a policy which, while it may not have met with universal approval, was appreciated by the vast majority of the customers. Either a commodity was held until there was sufficient for a share for each customer or, if it was perishable, each journey received its quota in turn and it was always a case of "fair shares for all."

In post-war years the steady expansion continued and early in 1948 the second mobile shop appeared on the road and two years later in 1950 a third was added.

An important factor in the success of the business is Mr. Hopkins' hand-picked staff, who are one of his main interests. "I feel that if there is a good staff giving good service, any businessman would be foolish not to recognise it and pay accordingly. Nothing seems to satisfy and keep the ship sailing better than a good wage and proper repayment for proper service," is his attitude.

There is a superannuation scheme for all staff over 21 years of age. He now employs six journeymen, one local delivery man, three first-class shopmen and two juniors under the supervision of himself and Mrs. Hopkins. Mr. Bernard Organ has been with him 19 years, Mr. Royston Billett about 18 years and Mr. J. Clutterbuck about 12 years. The other members of the staff, all of whom started from school, include three from one family. Mr. Kenneth Roberts. Mr. Derek Roberts and Mr. Jack Roberts, who have all returned on the completion of their National Service to settle in well again. Each of the lads called up for National Service has had a retaining wage paid provided he returned to the staff.

Although Mr. Hopkins has the highest regard for his present staff, he has not in the past hesitated to get rid of anyone who has not "pulled his weight," not merely because of the general effect on the business but because a slacker is a drag on the rest of a good staff.

Despite all the difficulties of the weather, not forgetting the hazards of daylight raids during the war, they have the unique record of never letting anyone down completely throughout the whole period of over 26 years. Although on occasion the vans have been up to four hours late returning home, the customers have been served.

Another factor in the continued prosperity of the business is insistence on quality at all times. Mr. Hopkins looks at it in this way: "If a person buys a certain commodity for 2s. a lb. and is unable to use or enjoy half of it. the portion used would have cost 4s. a lb.. whereas if a quality product is purchased at 3s. a lb. and every bit is enjoyed, it is in the end a cheaper and wiser purchase."

On October 8th, 1957. Mr. and Mrs. Hopkins and their daughter. Pat, who was born in 1938, moved from the High Street shop to a new home, Coach House, Bath Road, owing to the need for more accommodation for the extensive stock. Adjacent to Coach House has been built a garage for the mobile shops and it has been fitted to carry all the delivery goods and dry and canned goods to ease the traffic through the shop.

What of the future? Mr. Hopkins does not like to predict but he faces the future with confidence. Customers are steadily increasing and the district is growing apace but Mr. Hopkins is adamant that he will not start new journeys until he is sure he can provide and maintain the standard he has set for

the last quarter of a century.

" We are a completely private firm with no outside backing." he said. "My financial advisers have been the Westminster Bank and successive managers have readily given good advice and help which has been eagerly sought. My accountants are, and have been. I. A. Bonnor, of Bristol. My aim in life now is to see my business continue to expand and, subject to good health, to remain the head of it."

In recent years Mr. Hopkins has been able to devote some of his considerable energies and talents to public and social work and is now in his second year as chairman of Thornbury Parish Council. He has also taken an active and practical interest in the Thornbury Horticultural Society because of the great assistance they have given to many deserving charitable causes in past years. By whist drives and in other directions, Mr. Hopkins has been instrumental in raising hundreds of pounds on behalf of the Society and for other worthy causes.

Below is a letter written by Francis to his customers:

**FRANCIS G. HOPKINS
GROCER AND PROVISION MERCHANT
HIGH STREET, THORNBURY
NEAR BRISTOL Phone 2318**

October, 1940

TO ALL CUSTOMERS

Dear Sir or Madam.

During the past twelve months I have tried, not unsuccessfully I hope. to ensure all customers getting normal supplies, although I have not been able to meet all demands through difficulties beyond my control.

I am proud to advise you that I have now to hold myself ready for the call to serve with H.M. Forces, which means I shall be unable to give the personal touch to the business I have always previously entertained.

I now appeal to you every one to stand by and support my wife (who will carry on) with your esteemed orders in the future as you have always given to myself.

I feel sure that the Round Service will be maintained with the same satisfaction under the management of my representative, Mr. Joy. and as winter and the " Black-out " hours become longer much help would be given if all customers would prepare a complete list of their requirements before the van arrives. thus saving time and helping to ensure a safe return before dark.

Thanking you for all your previous support, and pending my safe return, I shall still feel I am serving you by doing my duty to the country and helping to fill the ranks.

Yours faithfully,
F. G. HOPKINS