

EXTRACT FROM  
***SOUTHEND MEMORIES***  
BY DEE GORDON

When Ken (Brown) left school in 1958, he had rather assumed that his dad would be able to get him a job at EKCO, but it did not happen. So he applied to a few shops and was taken on by Keddies department store in Southend High Street as a junior sales assistant in the hardware department. His starting wage was £3 5s per week, rising to £3 10s after three months. His three years here seem to have been exactly like the portrayal in *Are You Being Served?* (the 1970s sit-com). There was certainly a dandified floorwalker with a red carnation, and his hands behind his back, who was lord and master of all he surveyed. A strict hierarchy was observed, no doubt because of the amount of commission that could be earned. Juniors were not allowed to serve unless their seniors were busy. Even then, if a junior looked like securing a sale of a bulkier item such as a refrigerator, a senior would intervene and take the sale over. The manager, who had a key to the till, would open it up several times a day to see whose code numbers had been entered alongside the various sales, and if your number was there a little too often you were known as an Old Grabber. So poor old Ken spent much of his day doing a prodigious amount of dusting.

It was a bit of a standing joke within the department that if a customer wanted something delivered, especially if it was something they could easily carry themselves, then they must be from Thorpe Bay, which had a reputation for well-heeled residents at the time. Keddies' delivery van was a distinctive green, on a par perhaps with Harrods.

While at Keddies, Ken learned a lot about the retail business, about sales, and about china, especially Royal Doulton. Mrs MacGregor, known as Mac, was a bit of an expert when it came to china, and happy to pass on all she knew. The store also had its own social club, and day trips for the staff were organised on an occasional Sunday. The most memorable was a trip to Stratford-upon-Avon, but the driver got lost and they ended up spending most of the day on the coach, with a brief stop in Bath. They never got to Stratford.

The highlight of the Keddies year was the Christmas grotto. Everyone, including the juniors, would be involved in getting it set up. It took up half the basement area, with an electric train of about five carriages that took the paying customers on a well-planned tour. In return for what could have been a long wait in the queue, they were treated to a vista of snowmen, decorations, winter scenery, with the bells ringing out, culminating in a visit to Father Christmas who presented all the children with a gift.

The longest queue, however, was probably when Keddies opened Supa-Save at the back of the store in 1964, replacing the Strand cinema. Ken has the brass knocker from the door of the Strand's manager's office as a souvenir! He was on duty on opening day, allowing the crowds in a few at a time to avoid a stampede. No one in the UK had had the American experience of walking round and helping themselves to what was on display, paying only when they were finished shopping. Add to that the discounted prices and they were on to a winner.

Socially, in the late 1950s Ken had learned to jive, although he thought the Long Bar, the rock 'n' roll venue in the Palace Hotel at the top of Pier Hill, was a bit on the sleazy side. The Victor Sylvester dance studio above the Odeon in Southend High Street was more his cup of tea. One evening a week was beginners' ballroom night, and, to ensure no one was left without a

partner, the idea of a 'chair dance' was initiated. The chair was at one end of the dance floor; girls lined up one side, and boys the other, and as you got to the chair, you paired off. Ken remembers that as he got near to the front of the line, he started to count, and if he did not like the look of the girl that he would end up with, he would change his place in the line-up. As no doubt he was not the only one doing this the chair dance may not have worked quite as intended.