

# Thomas Tucker's

some scenes of a provincial draper's shop and department store



*edited by Gavin Holman, September 2018*

The first scene comprises the 190<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration special insert in the "*Exmouth Leader*", Thursday April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1991, which describes the history of the store and shows some of the range of its goods through congratulatory advertisements.

The second scene is an article from "*Devon Life*" in July 2002, which describes how the store changed over the years.

The third scene is a contemporary report of the take-over by Thomas Tucker in 1901.

The fourth scene shows the staff at the 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary together with a profile of "the boss"

The fifth scene reports the closure of the store in 2007.

The final scene shows what has happened since 2007.

# 1801



# 1991

# THOMAS TUCKER

Thomas Tucker, the department store in Exmouth, is celebrating its 190th birthday this year... 190 years of service to the shopping people of the town and district.



When the store was founded in 1801 King George III was on the throne of England, we were at war with France and Nelson was fighting, and winning, his famous battles (although Trafalgar was yet to be fought) and Exmouth was a fishing village with a population of only around 2,000.



Apart from a few houses, which had been built on Beacon Hill - one of which was occupied by Lady Nelson and one by Lady Byron, wife of the poet only scattered cottages interrupted the pleasant, unhurried, rural scene.

Exmouth had just been discovered as a health resort and at one of the local inns they played shilling whist and two-penny quadrille from 5.30 in the evening until 10.30.

It was in that year that Richard Webber, a young man of 24, said to be a man of vision and initiative, founded a small draper's business in the Strand, a business that was to grow until it reached its present status, over 190 years later, as Exmouth's best-known store.



The shop was in what was previously a house and local residents must have thrown up their hands in horror at someone in 'trade' occupying such a beautiful building. But Richard Webber, although young, was of strong character. His business thrived and he became a prominent figure in the local community.

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After the death of its founder the business was run by his sons until it was taken over by a Mr Palfrey who sold it later to Samuel Pimm. An advert in 1872's 'Memorials of Exmouth' tells how the store stocked a full range of carpets, household linens, shirts, ties, gloves and mourning materials.

It was in 1904 that the famous Thomas Tucker bought the business. In those days the windows were lit by over-hanging gas lamps set outside the shop and the inside was heated by paraffin lamps.

After Thomas' death in 1909 the store was taken over by his son Frank, who maintained the traditions of high quality service and, of course, the store's name.

February 1954 saw Frank Tucker's retirement after an admirable 45 years in the job.



The company was bought by Letheren's Ltd, a Fareham company who had been running a drapery business in that town, in Hampshire, for more than half a century. Managing Director of the company was Mr W.R. Letheren, who had been running the family's Fareham store for 30 years. But Devon was obviously in Mr Letheren's blood - his father was born at Ide, near Exeter - and he came to run the Exmouth store.

The Benzie family purchased the business in 1960, having sold their group of five stores to the House of Fraser. These stores were at Inverness, Elgin, Banff, Fraserburgh and Peterhead.

Since then Thomas Tucker has been modified, both in the layout and in the range of merchandise, to meet the changing needs of time. The latest major addition has been that of a menswear department, which includes a special section for the bowler.

What is unchanged, however, is the desire to provide a quality of attention and service that has been the hallmark of the business for all these decades.

Merchandise is still sent out on approval to those who find it difficult to visit the store, and special ordering is happily undertaken when the manufacturer can supply the goods. The experienced staff of 20 have, in most cases, been with the company for several years.

The customer, it is hoped, can call and browse without any pressure of the hard sell, but have the friendly assistance of the staff when needed.

Shopping at Thomas Tucker has been, is now, and it is hoped, will always be a pleasure.



*Fabrics of distinctions*



*Durable and long-lasting luggage for all purposes*



*Menswear department*



*Room to browse, expert advice when it is needed, dedicated staff all expertly trained, offering the complete shopping service founded on solid proven standards of quality*



*The under-cover story – offering a substantial range of classic styles in all departments, providing new and long-standing customers with probably the best choices in the region*




*Quality and value: comprehensive ranges offering great styles on show in our spacious interior*

**Congratulatory advertisements from the 190<sup>th</sup> Anniversary**

**Silhouette**  
IN BEAUTIFUL SHAPE

Available from  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
THE STRAND EXMOUTH  
*We would like to  
take this opportunity  
to wish Thomas  
Tucker a Happy  
190th Anniversary*

*Ladylove* from **Silhouette**



A classic underwired bra, ideal for the fuller figure! Manufactured in poly/cotton fabric with a lace which is exclusive to Silhouette. Style U141: Underwired Bra  
Colour: White  
Size Range: 32" - 40" D.  
DD, E, F Cups

*Brenton*


Handbags Ltd  
wish  
Thomas Tucker  
a Happy 190th Year



**BRENTON  
QUALITY  
HANDBAGS**  
AVAILABLE FROM  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
THE STRAND EXMOUTH

**DELSEY**  
PARIS

*Europe's fastest growing major  
luggage brand wishes Thomas Tucker  
all the best for a Happy Anniversary*



**THE DELSEY CLUB  
DELUXE RANGE  
AVAILABLE NOW AT  
THOMAS TUCKER  
THE STRAND  
EXMOUTH**

• **UNDERWEAR • BY**

*Brettles*

Available from  
THOMAS TUCKER  
The Strand  
Exmouth



**BEST WISHES  
FOR THEIR  
190th  
ANNIVERSARY**



# R RIDDELLA



Available from  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
THE STRAND EXMOUTH

**Happy  
190th Anniversary**

# totes®



AVAILABLE FROM  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
*Congratulations and best wishes for your  
190th year.*

# OSMAN

Exclusive Home Fashion

Co-ordinated bedding,  
furnishing fabrics,  
custom-made furnishings,  
and chintz lined  
ready-made curtains

◆  
New  
Spring Collections  
now available from

**THOMAS TUCKER**

Discover the  
difference in  
furnishings and  
bedding



# SLIMMA

ORIGINALS

We wish you every success  
in the future



Available from  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
THE STRAND  
EXMOUTH


 Tootal  
Group

**CHILPRUFE**  
MARKETING




Available from THOMAS TUCKER Exmouth  
**Congratulations on your  
190th Anniversary**

*Congratulations*  
**THOMAS TUCKER**  
THE STRAND EXMOUTH  
*On Your 190th Year*



*For Every  
Occasion*

**Marida Hats**  
Available from Thomas Tucker, Exmouth



**LADIES PRIDE**

Suppliers to  
THOMAS TUCKER  
**The Strand  
Exmouth**

*Congratulations to  
Thomas Tucker  
and Best Wishes  
For their  
190th Anniversary*



STYLISH  
ELEGANCE  
IN HOME  
FURNISHINGS  
BY  
**Lister**

Congratulations and success  
in your 190th year.

## Thomas Tucker's - From Dower House to Draper's Shop

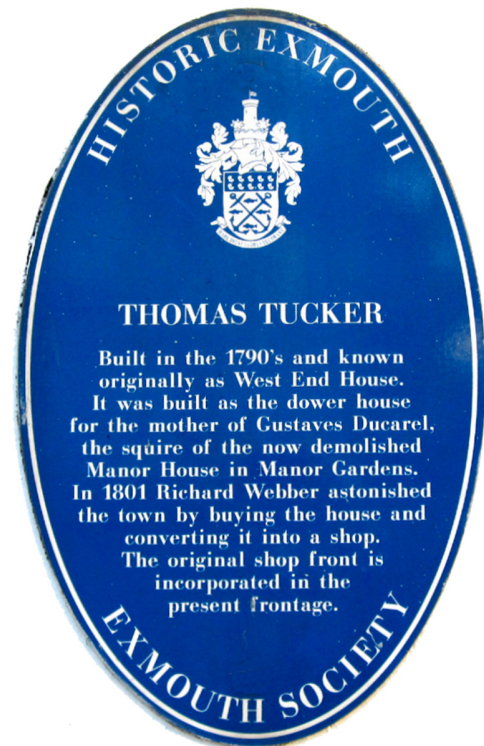
*(Devon Life, July 2002)*

Our story begins over 200 years ago with Richard Webber, the son of a farmer of Holcombe Rogus. Richard's father's farm servant – Sam Norman – decided to seek his fortune in London, and around 1799 Richard followed his example. One day he spotted Sam in a splendid footman's livery, riding on a carriage bearing a coat-of-arms. Sam stopped and invited Richard to his new home – he was working for Lord Horatio Nelson.

Later, Richard settled in Exmouth, which had just been 'discovered' as a health resort on account of its mild climate. In the meantime Lady Nelson had discovered her husband's liaison with Emma Hamilton, whom he had met in Naples, and they ultimately separated in 1801. Nelson settled £1,200 a year on his wife and she too moved to Exmouth – with the faithful Sam – to occupy one of the elegant residences on the Beacon, still today called Nelson House. She died in 1831 and was buried in Littleham Churchyard with very little public ceremony. One of the principal families of the Exmouth gentry in the late 18th century were the Ducarels who lived in the Manor House. This was demolished in 1894 and the grounds made over to the public. It is now the town's Manor Gardens.

On the night of 7th March 1800 Gerald Gustaves Ducarel was being driven home from Exeter carrying a large sum of money to pay the Exmouth Volunteers, of whom he was the Captain. His carriage driver was the son of one Pomeroy, Mr Ducarel's butler in time past and now the landlord of the Globe Hotel and also Exmouth's first postmaster. Suddenly, on a dark stretch of road, the coach was held up by a highwayman with a pistol, who demanded that Mr Ducarel hand over the money. But Ducarel immediately recognised the voice of his erstwhile servant and a tussle ensued in which Pomeroy was disarmed and fled empty-handed, never to be seen again in the locality.

Later that year, Mr Ducarel died and the Manor House was inherited by his son Philip. Included in the estate was a dower house originally built in grounds nearby for Philip's elderly grandmother who died in 1796. West End House, as it was called, was a large and elegant residence and local townspeople were astonished and not a little horrified when in 1801, Richard Webber, then only 24, bought it and converted it into a Draper and Silk Mercer's shop. But Richard was a young man of vision and initiative with a strong character. His business thrived and he became a prominent local citizen, so much so that when he died forty years later, all the shops were partially closed on the day of his funeral.



The concern was carried on by Richard's sons. In 1850 there was a tragic incident outside the shop. The Hon. Capt. Henry R. Harrington Elwes of Her Majesty's 12th Regiment of Foot was riding by, accompanied by his son, when his horse suddenly bolted and jumped over the railings at the corner of the building. Captain Elwes was thrown, hitting his head on the stonework, and he was impaled by the spikes through his thigh and arm. He was carried into the shop and received medical attention but died four days later from internal injuries. He is buried at Littleham with a monument recording the event.

The business changed hands in 1870 when the Webbers sold it to one CE Palfrey who advertised in the 1872 Memorials of Exmouth that his store stocked a large selection of carpets, household linens, shirts, ties, gloves and mourning materials. An early photograph shows a crinolined lady outside the front entrance.

**PALFREY & YOLLAND,**  
 (LATE WEBBER & SON),  
**B**EG respectfully to announce their return  
 from London, with a well assorted Stock of  
**DRESSES, SILKS, FURS, LACE AND  
 FANCY GOODS;**  
 And the Latest Novelties in  
**JACKETS, MANTLES, & TRIMMED  
 SKIRTS.**  
 They have also a large Stock of  
**Calicoes, Flannels, Blankets, &c.,**  
 Which are now lower in Price than for some years  
 past.  
 \*•• *A Liberal Discount allowed to Charities.*  
 Exmouth, October, 1870.

**FURNISHING DEPARTMENT.**  
**C. E. PALFREY,**  
 (LATE WEBBER & SON),  
**R**ESPECTFULLY invites attention to-his  
 Stock of  
**WOOL DAMASK AND REPS,  
 KIDDERMINSTER, TAPESTRY, AND  
 OTHER CARPETS,**  
**Summer Quilts and Counterpanes,  
 Linen and Calico Sheetings,**  
 And a great Variety of Superior IRISH DAMASK  
**TABLE CLOTHS** in all sizes, much under  
 present value.  
**New Patterns in Leno, Muslin,  
 and Lace Curtains.**  
**STRAND, EXMOUTH.**

In 1889 Samuel Pimm took over. A photograph taken during this period shows the carvings around the display windows executed by a local craftsman, Henry Algar, whose work could be seen on other buildings in the town. The left-hand window depicts three Cupids, two with bows and arrows. This was the Wedding window. The other side was the Funeral window and has two angels with trumpets, presumably heralding the next world, and a central veiled lady. Interestingly, in the early photograph, the window dresser appears not to have been informed of the meanings of the carvings and has arranged the funeral display on the wrong side!

The Strand and St. Andrew's Road,  
EXMOUTH.

# S. PIMM

Begs to announce that the

## ANNUAL STOCK-TAKING SALE

Will commence on

Monday, January 27th.

The Entire Stock has been re-valued, and will be offered at unprecedentedly Low Prices.

### Household Linen Department.

Remains of a Manufacturer's Stock of  
Bed and Table Linen,

COMPRISING :-

- 30 doz. Double Damask Table Napkins from 4s.11d doz.
- 60 Fine Double Damask Table Cloths, measuring 2 yds, 2½ yards, 3 yards, and 3½ yards long.
- 15 dozen Pure Irish Linen Huckaback Towels.
- 20 dozen Chrysty's White and Brown Turkish Towels.
- 30 White and Coloured Counterpanes, in various sizes.
- 57 Pairs Twill and Plain Cotton and Linen Sheets for single and double beds.
- 200 Pairs of heavy Nottingham Lace and Swiss Curtains, from 1s.3½d. to 8s.6d. per pair.
- Cretonnes, Dimities, Tea and Glass Cloth and Dusters, from 1s.6d. dozen.

### Blanket & Flannel Department.

115 Pairs Super Blankets, slightly out of condition, to be cleared much below value.  
Full-size Satteen Covered Down Quilts.  
Austrian and Travelling Rugs.

### Carpets. Rugs. Mats.

Several pieces of Axminster Carpet, 5-frame Brussels and useful Tapestries at Clearing Prices.

### DRESS MATERIALS, SILKS,

And all Season Goods to be cleared irrespective of cost.

### SHOW ROOM.

The whole of the Millinery Stock; Mantles, Capes, and Jackets, will be re-marked and offered at Prices that must ensure a speedy sale.

### Underclothing, Skirts, Dressing-gowns

With Bodice lined and full Bishop Sleeve, 4s.6d. each; odd makes of Corsets, slightly soiled, will be marked very low.

### Fur & Umbrella Department.

About 70 Umbrellas, Novelties in Dresden China handles, Real Ivory and Silver and Gold Mounts, much under regular Prices.  
Brown Brazilian Bear, Squirrel, Celestial, Kolinski, and other Boas about Half-price.

### Hosiery, Gloves, Ribbons, and Lace Goods,

All at clearing Prices.

In 1904 ownership passed to Thomas Tucker who added to the windows three elegant gas lamps publicising the Dressed Silks, Gloves, Hosiery, Costumes and Millinery. Sadly these have gone, but the carvings have been preserved to this day. Frank Tucker took over in 1909 on the death of his father and, thanks to an elderly aunt of one of the present staff, we have photographs of four of his employees from that period one of whom, at least, can be spotted on the picture of the 1914 works outing! It is recorded that over twenty girls were engaged in dressmaking alone. Twenty girls and a housekeeper lived in the attics of

the premises. One of these ladies is now in her 90s and has recounted how their rations were so meagre that they used to let a basket down on a rope and a kind neighbour would fill it with provisions.

A Mr Puddicombe of Exmouth photographed the Millinery department and hand coloured the finished picture sometime in the 30s. The hat stands still exist today. Over the years the shop premises were gradually enlarged until they eventually occupied all of the original dwelling house. Frank Tucker retired in 1954 and the business was bought by Letheren's Ltd of Hampshire who had been running their family's drapers store in Fareham for 30 years. WR Letheren, whose father was born in Ide near Exeter, ran the store until 1960 when it was taken over by the present owners.

Alexander Benzie, from Aberdeenshire, had sold five stores in the north of Scotland to the House of Fraser and came south to look for a smaller business. Exmouth in April was at its best with gardens and trees in full bloom, in contrast to the near winter conditions he and his wife had left 600 miles away. They fell in love with the town and decided to make a bid for the business of Thomas Tucker. Following four years' training at Harrods, their son, Ronald, joined them and he is now the present owner.

Times have changed greatly since 1801, when King George III was on the throne, Nelson was fighting his famous battles and Exmouth was a small fishing village with a population of about 2,000. Thomas Tucker's has remained throughout, selling fashions and fabrics and serving the folk of Exmouth and its environs with friendliness and personal attention. Long may it continue!



*Final weeks of the store – closing down sale in 2007*

## **Thomas Tucker takes over the shop in 1901**

*[Exmouth Journal, Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> May 1901]*

Of the old-established businesses of Exmouth none is so well-known as the drapery establishment in the Strand and St Andrew's Road, which has been so successfully conducted during a century by successive heads, and until of late was prospering well in the hands of Mr. S. Pimm. Mr. Pimm's successor, Mr. Thomas Tucker, as though to inaugurate the new century of the establishment, and to add to its dignity and further prosperity, has just completed most extensive and up-to-date improvements, which have been carried out with a care and taste which have combined elegance with the utmost ease a very great desideratum for customers and those who cater for their fancies in the present day. In this regard Mr. Tucker has been eminently successful.

Those who have been in the habit of frequenting the Shop are struck by its splendid proportions and airiness with the addition of a space at the rear of 35 feet, by 9 feet, its total capacity being now 33 feet by 28 feet. This is accomplished by removing the wall dividing apartments beyond and carrying the upper part upon iron girders supported by one or two piers.

Entered from the right is the richly decorated and appointed Mantle Department, with its two large windows commanding the Strand from two directions - one a newly inserted window. The dimensions of this apartment is 28 feet by 22 feet. It is decorated with a rich and expensive paper, chiefly of cream with a large and handsome pattern relieved with gold sprays. The ceiling is of lincrusta decoration tinted with white, a thick carpet charmingly harmonising and adding luxury.

Approached from the shop by a pretty pitch-pine staircase are the Millinery and Fitting Departments, within every convenience for customers. The Millinery Showroom is almost a paradise - with what appeals mostly to the feminine mind there - the decorations being the same as those of the downstairs showroom. The apartment is of ample proportions, some 20 feet by 20 feet, its numerous and finely proportioned black-framed mirrors, settees, and other appointments adding greatly to its charm and comfort.

Other alterations have been made by which the whole of that portion of the premises utilised for the business can be shut off at night, and at other suitable times, from that portion allotted to the use of the manager, the assistants, house-keeper, &c., to which access has been provided by means of a new staircase. The whole forms an admirable and perfectly arranged transformation, which cannot fail to be highly appreciated by the numerous patrons of Mr. Tucker, and must certainly bring a return for the very considerable outlay he has gone to for the facilitation of his business.

The contract included the insertion of two large new windows - one facing St Andrew's Road and the other commanding the north portion of the Strand. A most appreciable public improvement (though Mr. Tucker does not relinquish his right to the land) is the extension of the pavement outside the shop in St Andrew's Road, as well as adding

additional width to the lower side of the Strand. The work is hardly completed and includes the exterior decoration.

Mr. F. Grace, builder and contractor, of Manchester Street, is entrusted with the work, for the despatch and workmanlike finish of which, so far as it is complete, he has been highly complimented, and given every satisfaction to the head of the establishment. The work was carried out under the supervision of Mr. E. E. Ellis, architect, the Strand.

For a few days (including this Saturday) the new showrooms have been and are still open, replete with delightful novelties in dress, mantles and millinery, attracting numbers daily.

**GREAT SALE  
OF DRAPERY.**

**T. TUCKER'S**  
**Annual Stock-taking Sale**

WILL COMMENCE ON  
**MONDAY, JAN. 6th, 1902,**

When the **WHOLE** of his Stock will be offered at **GENUINE** and **SUBSTANTIAL REDUCTIONS** to effect a prompt and thorough Clearance.

Bargains will be found in all departments, comprising:—

Mantles	Laces	Sheetings
Jackets	Gloves	Sheets
Costumes	Hosiery	Flannels
Furs	Black Dresses	Blankets
Blouses	Colored Dresses	Eiderdown Quilts
Underclothing	Black Silks	Twill and Marcella Quilts
White and Colored Skirts	Colored and Fancy Silks	Cushions
Millinery	Calicoes	Lace Curtains, &c.

**MILLINERY** at less than half-price.

**EVERY ARTICLE** in stock will be lowered in price.

A special purchase of **FANCY BLOUSE FLANNELS** will be found remarkably cheap.

Carpets and Floorecloths will be marked at prices to clear, regardless of cost.

**SALE ON MONDAY, JAN. 6th**  
and following days.

*Many of the Bargains will be on show in the windows this day (Saturday)*

**THOMAS TUCKER,**  
*Draper and Silk Mercer,*  
**THE STRAND, EXMOUTH.**

*Established 100 Years.*

[1902]



## 170<sup>th</sup> Anniversary staff photograph

This photograph shows the staff and their partners at the celebration for the store's 170<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1971. On the back row, 6<sup>th</sup> from the right, there is Ronald Benzie, his wife Jean Benzie on his right, Alexander Benzie (the owner) on her right, and, lastly, Gertrude Benzie, his wife, on his right.



### **Profile** – March 1982

*[Meet the Boss, No. 9, by Eric Delderfield – Exmouth Herald, Friday 12 March 1982]*

For 180 years, the public has been served by Thomas Tucker's shop from the same premises in the Strand, Exmouth. It seems hard to believe that the firm was founded 14 years before the Battle of Waterloo.

It was begun by a young man of 24, Richard Webber, who must have been quite a go-getter for on the rate books of those days he was shown as the owner of several more houses in and about the town. Tucker's premises, which he opened in 1801 as a draper's and silk merchants, was originally a fine dwelling, and in outward appearance it has changed little over the years. After his death in 1841, his two sons carried on until 1870, when the business changed hands.

Another change came in 1889. Then Thomas Tucker senior bought the business in 1904 and his son, who will be remembered by older Exmothians, was proprietor until 1953.

In 1953, the business was purchased by Mr. Walter Letheren, who traded for seven years. Finally the whole concern was bought by Mr. Alexander Benzie, a native of Fraserburgh, Aberdeenshire, who had recently sold a group of stores in the North of Scotland. With Mrs. Benzie, he came south in search of a smaller business - and both were captivated by Exmouth.

Mr. Benzie had been involved in considerable community work in Fraserburgh. He was a member of the council, a magistrate, chairman of several committees and a member of Aberdeenshire County Council. He also served on the Harbour Board, which administered a considerable collection of berths. Whenever the harbourmaster set out to ride to the end of each quay, he would cover six miles.

In 1912/13, Fraserburgh was one of the world's premier herring ports. More than 800 vessels, each with a crew of six or seven, fished from the port each summer. With a population of only 10,000, the town could never find enough labour, so each year people flocked to the port in hundreds, the men to crew the boats and the women to clean and pack the fish for export, mainly to Germany and Russia. Mr. Benzie recalls that as a lad of 12 he saw two trains arrive on a Sunday, a day when no trains normally ran, so he went to see what was happening. It transpired that Churchill, with the 1914 war only a few days ahead, had called up the Royal Navy Reserve and as the Highlanders were all RNVR men, it required two special trains to take them away.

When Tucker's was purchased, Mr. and Mrs. Benzie's son, Mr. Ronald Benzie, was in London, where for four years he trained with Harrods. He later joined the firm at Exmouth and is now managing director. Steady progress has been made over the years. The business has been considerably enlarged in its range and number of departments, though any alteration to the exterior of the building has been resisted. Many shoppers pause to look with interest at the wood carving on the doorways and windows which was the work of Henry Alger, a craftsman of long ago.

Mr. Ronald Benzie is well known in the district as a golfer of repute. He is an ex-captain of the East Devon Golf Club. He is also a justice of the peace. Today the business flourishes, with over 30 departments and a staff of about 20 who still administer a customer service, not only to Exmouth, but to a clientele from all over Devon, as well as parts of Dorset, Somerset and even Cornwall.

## **End of an era** – July 2007

“Family closes 206-year-old shop. The owners said no-one was willing to buy it as a going concern.”

A family-run department store that is believed to be oldest shop in a Devon town has closed its doors. Thomas Tucker first opened in Exmouth in 1801 as a drapery shop and has since been run by five families. Ronald and Jean Benzie were the second generation of their family to run the shop, which stocked items across 30 different departments. Mrs

Benzie said their type of business was no longer growing and they could no longer afford to run it on their own. The building has been sold to another retailer.

The store stocked clothes, materials, haberdashery and household goods, and once housed a library in the 1960s. Mrs Benzie said: "*As an independent local company we could buy whatever we wanted, there were no central buyers. There was a unique mixture of things. There were regular customers who we bought for. But there was no one who was willing to buy it as a going concern.*"

## **After the end....**

The shop has remained largely empty for the last 10 years, being occasionally used for displays in the windows. Various redevelopment schemes have been proposed and came to nothing for one reason or another. Finally, in 2017, planning permission was given to convert the building into a restaurant on the ground level and five apartments on the first and second floor. The permission also allowed for the demolition of the former showroom in St Andrews Road to create two new apartments.

Here are some pictures of the store awaiting its new future:





