

**Are You Being Served? Sharpe's Department Store in Ventnor (Part One)**

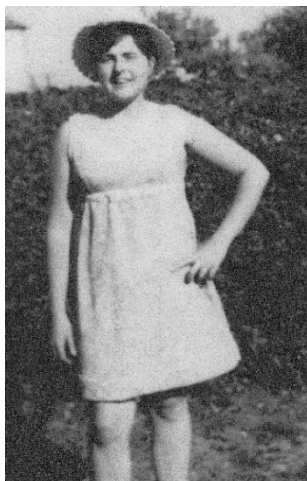
For this week and next, we wander down memory lane and hear accounts of two young women, Jenny Nigh (later Gardner) and Margaret Longbottom (later Davidson) who worked at Sharpe's department store in Ventnor High Street in the mid-1960s. Our title is taken from the BBC sitcom 'Are You Being Served', set in a department store and broadcast between 1972 and 1985.



As many readers will recall, Mollie Sugden played the inimitably indignant Mrs. Slocombe, with Wendy Richard taking the part of the innocent junior assistant Miss Shirley Brahms, with John Inman often stealing the show with the hilariously camp character of Mr. Humphries.

The series might seem today to give an outrageously exaggerated picture of shop life, but fifty years ago department stores were very different places to modern shops, and both Jenny and Margaret vividly recall the funnier moments of working in Sharpe's and the obvious parallels with the BBC series.

Sharpe's was established in the 1890s at Clarence Buildings, 16 and 18 High Street. In 1969, the premises were extended to take in the former Chocolate Shop at 20 High Street, the enlarged business continuing to trade until 1982. There was, as many will remember, a separate Sharpe's furniture store in Spring Hill in what is now the Heritage Museum, but that is another story. In the 1960s, when Jenny and Margaret worked at Sharpe's, the ground floor housed drapery (curtain and dress material), haberdashery (wool, threads, needles, ribbons and patterns) and household goods like blankets, sheets and towels. Up the main staircase, you then came to women's wear on the first floor, including lingerie, corsetry and dresses. There was also a children's clothing department here. The store owners at the time were Peter and Sybil White and there were around eight employees in total. Margaret recalls how, in ladies wear, Sharpe's sold the height of fashion at the time and was patronized by hoteliers' wives and by ladies from the 'big houses'. There was one who always bought all her Christmas gifts from the store and Jenny remembers her mother buying smart outfits of the kind you wore to weddings or christenings, or to dinner dances.



Jenny Nigh in the 1960s

Jenny began work when she was just 16, straight from school. As a junior, she had a number of menial duties, including making tea for staff in the basement and going out to March's Bakery in Church Street to buy sticky buns for everyone. But these particular tasks were a doddle compared to certain other things she had to do. Jenny takes up the story: *'My one dread was if, first thing in the morning, I was called upstairs to help Mrs. White get her corsets on'* (the Whites lived in a flat on the second floor). *'This was not a pretty sight, with a lot of huffing and puffing. The other fear was to be sent upstairs into the attic for something. It was very dark and creepy up in the roof and the other girls liked to scare me to look out for spiders, rats and even ghosts. When you were just 16, of course, you tend to believe whatever you are told. Opening the attic door, the first thing that confronted you in the gloom were tailors' dummies and mannequins that did indeed look ghost-like. So I would hurriedly collect what I had been instructed to fetch and then scurry down the back stairs as fast as I could'*.

Another task with which Jenny was required to assist was window-dressing. The windows were large and could take a whole day to complete. The mannequins had to be respectable at all times and were never allowed to be bare.

Jenny takes up the story once more: *'Conversations would sound like this: "that's no good, cover that bit up. Keep your arm straight, no, that's too high. Don't bend it, get behind, now give it a pull". I am sure you get the picture. I laughed so much that I cried and had to come out of the window because, on the pavement outside, passers-by were watching and it was not good publicity for them to see a sales girl laughing hysterically'*.

The story continues next week, with some of Margaret's memories. Michael Freeman, [Ventnor & District Local History Society](#) (This article was first published in the *South Wight Chronicle* in 2015; the photograph of Jenny has now been added)