



VENTNOR & DISTRICT LOCAL HISTORY SOCIETY



Are You Being Served? Sharpe's Department Store in Ventnor (Part 2)

One feature of Sharpe's that many younger people would find strange today is that the counters had no cash tills. There was a little office halfway up the backstairs where all payment transactions were dealt with. When a customer purchased an item at a store counter, the money was placed in a small receptacle that screwed together like a jam jar and this was then zoomed up a wire to the office. The cashier would check the amount, supply any change and then despatch the jar, with receipt, back down the wire to the counter.

These flying receptacles were always an endless source of fascination for young children who happened to be in the store. And that fascination increased when, in early 1965, the system was altered to a vacuum method where a small metal cylinder was sucked up a long metal tube or pipe. Jenny recalls inserting money in the cylinder, placing it in the tube, closing the endflap and then pressing the button, whereupon the cylinder whooshed up to the cashier's office in a cacophony of hollow metallic sounds. Some of the store girls used to use the cylinder to send secret messages to each other when it was quiet and the owners were not around. Many department stores up and down the country used this method of handling payments. In fact, some of the vacuum tube systems survived in more traditional stores right up until the 1970s.

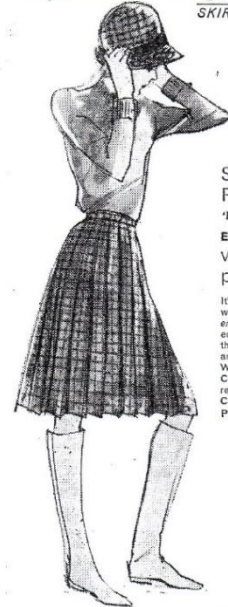
When Margaret Longbottom applied to work at Sharpe's, she was interviewed by Mrs. White who told her in no uncertain terms that she would have to be known there as Miss Long, for there was no way anyone could be heard calling out 'Miss Longbottom' across the store floor. Even when Margaret got married, she was still called Miss Long.

Margaret remarks how it was the fashion era of Audrey Hepburn and Jackie Kennedy, a time of silk scarves and silk-lined gloves. But things were beginning to change. When the hosiery rep called one day (1966 or 1967), he offered to supply Sharpe's with ladies tights. However, the owner, Mr. White, said at the time that they could not possibly stock the full range as they would not sell! How wrong could he have been! His wife Sybil had a legendary catch phrase: 'keep dusting girls'. When the store was not busy everyone was required to look as if they were and so drawers were tidied and re-tidied and dusted. When Margaret received a congratulatory telegram from the owners on the occasion of her marriage, it ended with the words 'keep dusting'.

Reflecting on Jenny and Margaret's memories, it is not difficult to see how one could extract from them a script for the BBC sitcom 'Are You Being Served'. And one of the funniest moments might well have been over the speculation among the staff about the moment when Mr White's wig (he treated himself to the latest London fashion in wigs) was accidentally snatched off by one of the receptacles containing the cash as it whizzed by wire across the store just above people's heads. It had already been dislodged once before by him knocking his head beneath a shelf. You could not have hoped for a more side-splitting comedy of situation.

Michael Freeman [Ventnor & District Local History Society](http://www.ventnorhistory.org.uk). All thanks to Jenny and Margaret for supplying these entertaining reminiscences. (This article was first published in the *South Wight Chronicle* in 2015; the photograph showing Margaret in 1965 was added in 2023)

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