

T for Tradesmen

The Rag and Bone Man

“Any old rags” or something sounding vaguely like that...we would hear the call from several streets away. We’d run inside to beg our Mum for any old clothes. But outgrown clothes were re-fashioned in our house: dresses into skirts, trousers into shorts but, just occasionally, a hand-knitted cardigan would have ‘run up’ in the wash (shrunk in too hot water) or the elbows would have worn into holes. We would gather up the small bundle and wait anxiously on the kerb-side for the Rag and Bone Man to reach us. Eventually we would see him, actually it was his horse and cart, approaching. If we were lucky, his arrival would co-incide with his need for a cigarette and then he would give his patient old nag a nose-bag of oats. We would seize the opportunity to pat the horse’s flanks, being careful to avoid his rear hooves.

Reuben in Waterloo was the local ‘totter’. He pushed a heavy wheelbarrow around calling out for any old rags. It was actually a large wooden box on wheels which almost dwarfed Reuben himself.

The coal man

On delivery days I would sometimes get a shock when a black face, eyes unnaturally white, appeared above the back yard gate. One of the men who collected the bins had a disfigured face, one side of which was red and raw-looking, with puckered skin and a missing ear. My Nanny told me he’d been badly burned in the War.

The gate opened and the coalman strode in, the sack of coal slung over his back, apparently weighing very little. The coalman usually wore a kind of leather helmet with a long piece hanging at the back to protect his neck and shoulders. The 100cwt sack would be tipped over his shoulder and, with a roar like thunder, would land on top of the dwindling heap in the corner of the yard. Some people had their coal delivered straight into their cellar through a hole in the pavement directly in front of their street door. Our coal was delivered into our small back yard, opposite the back door. The coal pile was next to the mangle which used on washing days. My mum would stand by the back door when the coal man was delivering. “*I don’t want all slack*”, she’d say. Slack was the dusty remains of crushed coal. It was useful for getting the fire to blaze but you needed bigger lumps or cobs of coal for a longer-lasting blaze.

The bin man

Every house in the 1950s had a single dustbin which was made of cheap metal with a clanging lid. When the bin-men called there was a lot of crashing lids and banging of metal as they progressed up the street. The bin men would pick up the full bin on their shoulder before tipping it into the open sided truck. Everything went into the bin. No recycling in those days or wheels on the bins themselves. Except there was a sort of recycling: vegetable peelings, ends of loaves, rotten fruit went into a separate bin...the pig-swill bin which was collected by the local farmer who gave us half a dozen fresh eggs in exchange. Dustbin lids made excellent impromptu sledges when the snow came.

The Milkman

Milk was delivered to my grandparents' house by horse and cart. Farmer Brown had the milk churn on the cart and my grandma would go out to him with a large white jug which he filled from the churn. She would cover the top of the jug with a crocheted lid and put the jug on the cold stone slab under the stairs. Our milk came in glass bottles delivered, rain or shine, by the milkman in his electrically operated float. You would be lying in bed and hear the whine of the float coming nearer and nearer, followed by the clink of the bottles and the occasional smash as a bottle fell out of the man's hands. The bottles were inscribed with the following rhyme:

"This bottle cost tuppence, it's as brittle as owt, if you brek it or lose it, we're working for nowt"

On cold winter mornings the milk had sometimes frozen in the bottle and we would stand the bottle in warm water to defrost before we could eat our breakfast cereal.

The insurance collector

Mr Shirt collected the pennies that my Nanny paid into an insurance policy. He called every week with a leather bag over his shoulder and dutifully filled in the insurance payment book. The pennies were always kept on the mantelpiece under one of the brass ornaments ready for when he called.

The Knocker Upper

The man with the long stick who tapped on windows to rouse dozing millworkers was a dying breed when I was a child. The Brushworks around the corner on Warre Street had its own hooter to announce the start and end of shifts and living alongside the railway line meant we hardly needed a clock in the house.

Peddlers

From time to time peddlers or hawkers would call at the door selling brushes, coat hangers and dusters. When the fair was in town exotic looking women in shawls would appear selling wooden clothes' pegs from a basket and offering sprigs of lavender "for good luck".