

Spearings, a Dedham Institution

The kind of shops that flourish in a place tend to reflect its character. And for most of the 20th century Dedham had its very own Fortnum and Masons, in the form of Spearings.

F Spearing and Son began life soon after the first world war, when Fred Spearing moved out from London, with his wife and three children. He had fought in the war, earning a Distinguished Conduct Medal, and perhaps that widened his horizons, or decided him, now in his early fifties, on a change of life.



Standing: Fred Junior, daughter May, Jack Spearing

Seated: Fred Spearing & wife Nellie (Geraldine Eleanor)

He had previously run a market stall in London, selling all sorts of household necessities, and the shop that he opened was a general store to begin with. Gradually, however, it became a high class food shop, catering to the needs and whims of families in the village's big houses, and further afield.

The premises, one of Dedham's oldest buildings once known as The Tudor House, and now occupied by the chemist, has a wonderful panelled room and several

bedrooms above the shop, where the family lived. They also owned the range of useful outbuildings behind – since converted to housing. One was made into a cheese store, with great wheels of Stilton and other cheeses, which had to be turned every day.



The shop cooked its own gammon and hams, which were then carved off the bone for customers on the cold meat counter. And there was an extensive wine cellar. Long before the days of self conscious coffee connoisseurs, they invested in a big red machine for grinding coffee beans, giving a wonderful aroma to the shop.

Fred Spearing must have been an astute businessman, realising that quality food delivered to the door was a lucrative market waiting to be tapped. He employed delivery boys on bicycles, and later three vans to deliver items, and customers could just ring, put in an order, have it added to their account, and receive the goods not long after.

All those in the area who considered themselves well-to-do had accounts, including Sir Alfred Munnings and Randolph Churchill when he lived at East Bergholt. Paperwork was therefore an important part of the business. In the early days the shop had one of those vacuum tube systems speeding money and information to the back office.

A former member of staff commented that although customers were thought of as comparatively well off, ladies would come in and buy one egg and a slice of bacon because their favourite nephew was coming for tea, or 2oz of cheese to go with their husband's glass of port at night. And not all those who considered themselves socially superior actually paid their bills promptly when presented. Bailiffs had to be called in on at least one occasion.



Son Jack went into the army, then came out and was the mainstay of the shop in due course. His brother Fred also went into the army, then joined Ind Coope and Grants of St James's, so oversaw the wine side of the business. In the fifties, Jack Spearing engaged Dedham architect Raymond Erith to build him a house at Lamb Corner. He also bought a cottage at the top of Grove Hill, and had Erith build two more, as tied houses for staff.

In a more snobbish age, there was a definite divide between villagers who shopped at the Co-op, and those who wouldn't dream of setting foot in it. But also, in a time when the Co-op was fairly limited in its stock, the good and sophisticated food on offer at Spearings was simply unavailable elsewhere in the locality. Fred Spearing's daunting wife, seemingly known as Nellie, had a tyrannical reputation, and ensured that strict social priorities were observed in the shop itself. One villager (Avril Biggins) recalls that when sent by the school headmistress to buy two slices of ham off the bone, she had to wait while anyone

considered more important, or simply older, was served first.

The business was valued by non customers as a source of jobs, employing some 25 people in its heyday, down to about eight towards the end. Christmas time was tremendously busy, with the shop window elaborately dressed, and orders crowding in. It gave an opportunity for local youngsters to earn some money. Not a lot. The son of David Whybrow, Provisions Manager, recalls receiving sixpence a day for helping to sort out the Christmas orders for delivery and collection.

By the late 1980's supermarkets were a growing threat and the business declined, as Jack Spearing reached old age. He died in 1985 and Spearings was sold twice in quick succession, the second owner creating houses and flats from the various buildings, before selling to Martin Hogg's China from Lavenham. Resentful at losing a cherished shop, no villagers darkened its door, and it quickly closed. In due course, Jack and Phyllis Phillips moved their pharmacy from Royal Square into the premises, and it has been a chemist ever since.

Businesses flourish when their time is ripe. Spearings suited Dedham, and Dedham suited Spearings. The shop was an institution, at the heart of the village for nearly seventy years. It's rather sad that the only trace now of the Spearing name is the gravestone in Dedham churchyard of founder Fred and his formidable wife. His tribute reads, *'Life's work well done'*, and hers, possibly with a touch of humour, *'Now cometh rest'*.

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