

Reynolds: A Step Back In Time

This year Reynolds are celebrating 145 years of trading and as such are the longest standing family business in Bognor Regis. The business is currently run by the 5th generation.



The business was started as a small shop in 1867 by Samuel Reynolds at no 13 West Street. Bognor was rapidly changing around this time, the railway had arrived in Bognor in 1864; the pier in 1865 and more premises were being built in the town. Samuel, the son of a farmer, was a cabinet maker and with the town's expansion his skills were much in demand. In this year he married Eliza Screeder, a shepherdess, in the Hanover Chapel in the High Street, opposite the site of today's furniture store.

Samuel like many people of this era had many 'strings to his bow' and in addition to his retail shop early trade and advertising papers show that he was involved as 'auctioneers, appraisers, house agents, cabinetmakers, upholsterers and undertakers'. Samuel and his wife had 11 children, some of whom died in childhood; however others became involved in the family business. Sadly Samuel died in 1897 when his wife took over the business until her death in 1912 when their children became more involved. Charles, the eldest, born in 1871 was involved in the funeral side of the business, but he was also very keen on his allotment in Devonshire Road, where he could be found if missing from the company premises. He exhibited at the Chelsea Flower show where he won bronze medals for his gladioli and dahlias. He even had a large flowered yellow dahlia named after him.

The next in line Frank, born in 1873, was originally apprenticed to a photographer in Coventry, where he met his wife. His interest in photography resulted in a studio being built at the back of the High Street shop. Frank entered the business in 1897 when his father left him £30 in his will on the condition that he gave up his photographic business at the back of the shop. It was Frank and his nephew Alfred who were responsible for perhaps the most prestigious of all the Reynolds contracts. In 1929 Reynolds were asked to help make Craigwell House ready for the arrival of a convalescing King George V and on his recuperation they were asked to convey King George's personal effects back to Windsor. The company has photos of the King's rooms during this time and the Company's removal vans located outside Windsor castle. The records indicate that there is also a very rare photograph of the young Princess Elizabeth and her sister playing in one of the rooms.

Now we will have a look at their premises. First Samuel opened at No. 13 West Street for a period of three years from 1867, but due to increased business he moved No. 27 the High Street. In some of the early pictures it was evident that Reynolds sold anything, they actually claimed that their range was 'from a hat pin to a house'. They generally dealt in furniture but one of their specialities was baths, as can be seen in early pictures with them hanging outside the store. They were making furniture on the premises and retail and services were becoming more important and when No.29, next door became empty they moved in, letting No. 27 to a grocer until 1900. In 1900 they reclaimed No. 27 and combined it with 29 the High St., making it the largest shop in the town. In 1905 the shop fronts were renovated in a new white Edwardian frontage and then in 1908 another floor was added to No. 29.



Bognor people must have found this family concern covered most of their needs and Reynolds were obviously respected and used by so many people. Because their businesses covered such a wide sphere it would appear that you could use one service and become aware of another; i.e. use the estate agents and need the removers and storage services. Business continued to expand and the need for storage became very necessary and thus in 1911 the Depository in Canada Grove was built. This building had space for Auctions and within four years it was necessary for another floor to be added, making the imposing building we have today.

The building of the depository complete a triangle of notable buildings with the Picturerome building in the 1870's, and today's Railway Station in 1902. In the early days the Depository advertised its storage prices as storage of pianos, at 4s.6d. for a grand piano. This service is still available today but it is now in competition with all the other highly advertised storage units, unlike when the Depository was first opened.

We return to the store in the High Street following the various expansions prior to the 1st World War. Many people will be familiar with the early views of the Reynolds vans which were used to move furniture and people around this town. One of these vehicles was on loan from Mr. F.W. Jenkins in Longford Road and this Foden engine was commandeered during the 1st World War and left abandoned in a ditch near Petworth.

The Companies successful estate agents formally started in 1877 with the first ever sales of property by auction when five cottages were sold at Sidlesham by Samuel's business. This part of the business continued to such an extent that they established an Estate Office which continued until 1989 when due to the recession it was decided to discontinue this part of the business. Over the years they offered insurance and had a plaque on the wall from the Phoenix Assurance Company to note their connection. Reynolds were ultimately presented with a bronze plaque to celebrate their 100 years association with the Insurance Company.

In 1918 Charles's Reynolds three sons went into the business, Alfred, Gordon and Donald along with a cousin Frederick Roberts. Each one of them was responsible for various areas of the business, Alfred was in charge of storage and removals; Gordon worked in furniture, Don drove the removal vans and Frederick Managed soft furnishings. Business continued to improve and in the 1920s there were various improvements and in 1928 another floor was added. Charles died in 1935 just when the store was being modernised. An 'electric passenger lift' and a new central heating system were installed and by 1939 the tall sweeping deco style was added to the front of the store. One of the new features was the setting up of 10 furnished rooms which would provide customers with ideas of room layout in ordinary surrounding. These rooms were knocked down during the stores last major refurbishment in 2005 to provide the contemporary, light and spacious open plan show floors we have today.

When war broke out decisions had to be made on the way forward. Frank Reynolds cancelled all outstanding orders for furniture, carpets etc., but this was against the advice he was given by his nephews. He was concerned that they would have stock no one required. During the war in 1940 the cottages and rear area of the store was classified as being in a defence area and there was no access to the premises from Bedford St., during this period, it was therefore difficult to run the business fully and a request was made for a rate-evaluation. The war placed a great burden on the shop during this period but the company was able to survive due to the funeral, auction and storage sides of the business.

Two specimen rooms were converted into bedrooms for fire fighters and there were also facilities for snooker and darts to provide relaxation the fire fighters. Both Norman Reynolds (the current chairman) and Patrick Reynolds enjoyed many hours there. Staff were expected to do fire

fighting a number of times per week and there were also Bren guns mounted on the roof. A room was also used by the war office as an emergency food store, you can imagine what the penalties would have been if the store was broken into.

By 1953 with continued expansion they purchased another premise that of No. 31 High St., for £6,000. This had once been Bognor's first Town Hall. This new premise became the Estate Office and later the funeral department.

Another Reynolds premise was at No. 38 and 40 London Road and this comprised a sale room and furniture warehouse which was also known as Victoria Hall, immediately opposite St. John's Church, today Boots and W.H. Smith's. The premise was auctioned on 15th July 1964 by Reynolds and Tregears when they ceased to have need for the premises. It was here that the local historian Gerard Young would return from time to time to purchase items for his home in Flansham. The records for all the actions carried out by the Company are still safely retained.

The store and of course the family continues. In 1953 Norman Reynolds joined the Company starting work as an Office Clerk working up to the position of director in 1962. His time with the company covered a variety of periods in the town's history. Norman has always been known as being interested in Local History and the family collection of images of the development of the town have always been of interest to us all. Sadly some records have been lost in fires and war time bombing, much of the family collection is now with the West Sussex records Office, who have copied all the images to be retained for future generations to ensure they are not lost.

Certain aspects of the Company have changed. Over the years the Company has consolidated its activities on the furniture store, funeral service and storage businesses. There is no china and ironmongery departments' haberdashery, auctioneers, appraisers, removals or estate agents. Advertising in the past has been carried out with advertisements in Street Directories or newspapers; today there are printed colourful leaflets and the website in addition to the newspapers which are all required in a much more aggressive marketing world. The range of goods has had to continue to be of a high standard in a much more competitive market than those dealt with by previous generations.

Changes are still continuing and in 2001 the newest generation of the family purchased the famous Bobby's on the corner of the High Street in an attempt to expand the business further. However by 2004 this had not proved to be beneficial and they let the premises that had been originally built in 1914.

Today the Company is run by Dominic, James, Stephen and Matthew Reynolds and has just been joined by Freya Reynolds, Dominics youngest Daughter who are the direct descendants of Samuel Reynolds, and similar to all the previous directors they are each responsible for specific areas of the Company.

To conclude the story of the Reynolds family we have now to look at the other well known service that they have provided since the days of Samuel Reynolds. The majority of people who were involved with cabinet making would almost naturally become involved in the community as funeral services providers. One of their early bill heads from 1904 show that alongside house furnishing, upholsterers, auctioneers, appraisers and house agents they were also involved with funerals completely furnished. The account for this particular funeral cost £4.10s.0d

In the days of Samuel Reynolds you would be taken to the funeral in a horse drawn carriage and despite all the changes, this can still occur again. Reynolds own glass sided hearse is on display at their premises in Longford Road and this was the type of hearse that had been used in the time of Samuel and had been stored in their Depository for a number of years before it was renovated and now returned for use. It was during the 1870's the glass sided hearse made its appearance. It was consequently much lighter and far less sombre than the closed variety used previously. It became an overnight success. The mourners and passers by were able to see the coffin and the undertakers handwork and craft. One drawback was the fact that this carriage could not be used to carry mourners on the way back to the houses.

Two fine black groomed horses pulled the glass hearse and these horses had black shiny hooves whereas most of the other working horses had dirty hooves. This was because the horse's hooves were painted with Archangel tar. The man in charge of the hearse had a seat up high in front of the hearse. He was dressed in black and wore a castor hat. A white scarf or ribbon was tied round the rim of the hat and a long piece of ribbon floated behind him.

Reynolds kept its own horses which were imported from Belgium. The breed was known as Belgian Blacks and were all supplied as geldings as the vendors did not want Reynolds breeding its own supply! The horses were stabled in the workshop yard in Belmont Street.

In the 1920's it began to be evident that a motor hearse was essential for the success of the business. Reynolds started using motor cars about 1927 and continues to update its fleet as time goes by. Charles Reynolds, the eldest son of Samuel, honestly believed it was his duty to ensure a good Christian burial for people who could not afford one. Charles Reynolds died in 1935 as a result of his work ethic. He suffered from asthma and was feeling poorly but had promised to carry out the funeral service for a friend. He conducted the funeral service in the pouring rain and died as a result of his condition deteriorating thereafter.

Reynolds made all their coffins by hand up to 1973. As you can imagine this was a laborious process particularly with regard to bending the wood into a coffin shape. In the early days most coffins were made in



Elm, today it is Oak. As the world changes and we become more aware of global changes, people now consider the environment and as such coffins can now be made in bio degradable cardboard or as a wicker coffin. You can be buried in a woodland area or have a tree planted in your name.

As we enter the 21st century, with the widening of beliefs, and changing perspectives, things have really changed. Services have taken on a new perspective for many people. Services can now include well known songs, sung by choirs or pop groups. Readings are from the bible, well known songs or muses. Family members and friends tell their own stories and memories during the service, which may or may not be of a religious nature. All of this is a long way from the austere and sombre services of the past.



(L-R) The 5th Generation, Matthew Reynolds, James Reynolds, father Norman Reynolds Stephen Reynolds Dominic Reynolds

Over the last 145 years Reynolds have touched all areas of many Bognor residents and got involved with the various festivities and celebrations in the town. Reynolds have also expanded with offices in Chichester and Littlehampton. However one aspect that cannot be equalled is the fantastic photographic collection started by Frank and continuing until today. Many of the early images on glass slides are now with the West Sussex Record office, but much of the Company and town's photographic history is retained by the family for which we should all be very grateful. There are currently fifteen grandchildren and one great grandchild of Norman Reynolds and let us all hope that the line of succession continues and that Reynolds continue to play a part in our town centre business.

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