



In the mid-20th century Murrays was the iconic Wycombe department store: Mike Dewey traces its history.

REGINALD RIVETT, the founder of Murrays, was born in 1889 at Church Farm in Beeston, Norfolk, where his father was a farmer and cattle dealer. After attending a local boarding school, he gained employment as a travelling salesman in textiles. This job first brought him to High Wycombe in 1910. In 1912, he married Marion Hetherington, and the couple had 5 children: Christine (born in 1913), James (1915), Murray (1919), Elizabeth (1926) and Digby (1927).

During his visits to Wycombe, Reginald became so enchanted by what was then a charming little market town that he and his family moved here in the early 1920s. He saw the business potential in Wycombe, with its expanding furniture industry, and in 1923 decided to buy the drapery section of Drings' shop at 6 Church Square. He named this "The Beehive Drapery" (Fig.1). The business expanded, and in the early 1930s he opened more shops, one at the western end of the High Street, another on the east side of Church Square, and specialist shops in White Hart St. selling fashions, knitting wool and gloves and hosiery.

In 1935, Reginald acquired the shop at No. 27 White Hart St., with an area of 3,000 sq ft, selling household goods. WWII put a temporary end to the further expansion of the business, and brought heartache to the family when their eldest son James was captured by the enemy and held as a prisoner-of-war. The end of the war saw the safe repatriation of James, who returned to work in the family business.

It was in 1948 that Reginald took the momentous decision to sell all his shops except one, and concentrate on developing a department store in High Wycombe, based on No. 27 White Hart St. He named the store Murrays, after his second son. The concept of a department store was new to Wycombe at that time (Marks & Spencer did not open until 1958). Murrays was known as a 'walk-round' store (Fig.2) and became an instant success. In 1951, the



Fig.1. Reginald Rivett's first enterprise in Wycombe was to rename Drings.



Fig.2. Murrays was the walk-round store.



Fig.3. After Murrays took over the Methodist Church and made it part of their store, a connecting bridge was built.

old Methodist church in White Hart St. was acquired to allow Murrays to expand. Although adjacent to No 27, it was actually separated from the church by a 12-ft-wide alleyway (Fig.3). So when the interior of the church was gutted and converted to a store format, a bridge was built over the alleyway to connect the two buildings. The planners at that time specified that the fabric of the church must be preserved, so a modern cladding had to be given to the building.

In 1953 Reginald relinquished most of his responsibilities in the business, with the appointment of his son James, known to everyone as Jim, as Managing Director. Jim set about achieving his vision of building a department store in the centre of High Wycombe with great energy and determination. In 1955 the business purchased the old National School building, adjacent and to the west of the former Methodist Church. A joint venture was entered into with the well-known local company Frank Adams Sports and the Trustees Savings Bank to develop the site. The school building was demolished, and a further extension to Murrays built, adding another 28,000 sq ft of selling space (Fig.4). Having seen this major development successfully completed, Reginald decided to retire to Brisley Hall, East Dereham in his native Norfolk, but remained as Chairman of Murrays.

At that time Murrays was the major department store in Buckinghamshire, with a staff of nearly 300. The 'wave canopy' above the front entrance to the store, and the

clock which moved up-and-down with the lift, became Wycombe icons. The Frank Adams sports shop was also purchased at this time, increasing the selling space to 49,000 sq ft.

Unfortunately Reginald did not enjoy his retirement for long: he died at Brisley Hall on September 6 1963, and his wife Marion took over the Chairmanship of Murrays. In his obituary the Bucks Free Press remembered him as 'genial in character, he was a man of great drive and foresight, and an early pioneer of modern stores'.

With the advent of the Octagon development in Wycombe town centre in the mid-1960s, Murrays agreed to take 24,000 sq ft behind their existing store. Unfortunately the major disruption caused by the re-development of the town centre, which included the inner relief flyover road, resulted in several difficult trading years for Murrays in the late 1960s, before the Octagon was opened in October 1970. Jim Rivett, now Chairman as well as Managing Director, decided that the original store in White Hart St should be re-developed, using contemporary styling. The 'concession shops' and 'street of shops' concepts were developed in the new store (Fig.5), an example being the Childrenswear department.

In 1973, Jim's son Richard was appointed Managing Director of Murrays. The company was now a diversified business, with the making up of curtains and fitting of floor covering for homes and businesses taking place in factories in West End St. A major fire occurred on Nov 29 1975 at the West End St factory, which was shared with furniture manufacturer D. Ridgley & Sons (Frames) Ltd. The building was completely gutted, and Murrays lost stock worth over £20,000, but production was immediately transferred to the Cressex factory.

In the late 70s/early 80s Murrays experienced difficult trading conditions, and made substantial losses. In 1983, half of the store on the White Hart St frontage was sold, with Principles, Salisbury's and Taylor & McKenna taking space. This failed to stop the decline of the business, and on the 30th March 1985 the store closed after the property was sold to the investment company Scottish Provident Institution. Wye Contract Furnishing Ltd, formerly Murrays Manufacturing, was sold in 1986; many of the highly skilled staff who were trained from school still work for the company.

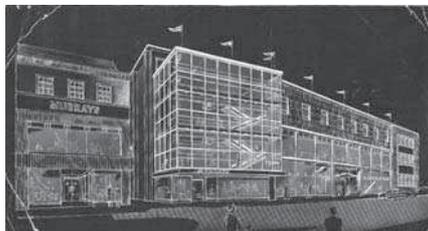


Fig.4. 28,000 sq.ft. of selling space were added in 1955.



Fig.5. After the Octagon opened in 1970, Murrays was redeveloped with the "concession shops" and "streets of shops" concepts.



Fig.6. Do you know who any of these young ladies are? Mike Dewey would like to hear from you if you do, on 01628 525207!

There are many people in and around High Wycombe who worked for Murrays. A group of them are seen relaxing on the rooftop terrace (Fig.6), and Mike Dewey would be pleased to hear from them and their personal recollections of the business.

One person who has recounted her memories is Mrs Betty Dean. Betty remembers joining the Rivett's woolshop on the northern side of White Hart St in about 1947, shortly before it was sold. After a year or two she left, and trained as a GPO telephonist. In 1955/56 Betty was approached by Joan Smith, known as 'Miss Canneaux', who was for many years head of personnel, to join the store as telephonist/receptionist. Betty worked for Murrays until the birth of her first child in 1958, and then again on a part-time basis after her children went to school. She remembers that she was chosen to be a mannequin at the first Murrays fashion show in the town hall in 1958, and received training from professional models from London. She then found out she was pregnant, and thought that she would not be able to participate, but was told that she could model maternity clothes!

Mike Dewey