

The shop at 186 Marlborough Road, Oxford

Keith Palmer, November 2014



For most of the 1920s my grandfather, Joseph (Joe) Austin Hancox and his family ran a small shop at 186 Marlborough Road. Prior to this they probably lodged with a relative at 77 Marlborough Road, so they would have been aware very quickly that the previous shopkeeper was giving up, as 77 is nearly opposite 186.

The shop was known as JA Hancox 'Handy Stores' and was apparently very busy, selling a wide range of goods, food, fuel and so on, and was 'open all hours' like most small shops at this time. Joe, who had experience as a wheelwright and carpenter, probably already had a job at Raworth's, the car body builders in St Aldate's, so much of the running of the shop rested on his wife Maud and other family members as they grew old enough (even when school homework still had to be done).

My mother Lucy remembered serving in the shop, measuring out or weighing various goods like paraffin, lard, loose broken biscuits (cheaper in those days than unbroken ones), sugar, vegetables, bread and so on. All the weighing was done on the same scales so any lard on the 'plate' would cause problems with the sugar! Paraffin must not be spilled and nothing dropped on the counter or floor. Everything smelled of paraffin or of other strong-smelling articles in the shop. She also remembered how cold it was, not only in the shop but also in the house (behind and above the shop). On many occasions she had to do her homework in the freezing attic by the light of a candle, and would get called to serve in the shop in the middle of it.



The shop in around 1921, just after Joe Hancox took it over. (l-r) Joe's wife Maud, and his children Dennis, Elsie and Lucy. Note the open space adjacent to the building, which is now filled in with a modern house.

It was a fairly hard life for all the family but between the shop and Joe's work at Raworth's they must have made enough, because in 1929 they gave up the shop and moved to a larger house at 1 Lincoln Road. They even bought a car!



Dennis and Elsie outside the shop in about 1923.

Joe named the new house 'Subiaco' after a suburb of Perth in Western Australia where he had lived in 1912-13 with his first wife Florence. Joe and Florence Horley had married in Bloxham near Banbury in 1909. They sailed to Perth in 1912 when Lucy, my mother, was just over a year old. Joe found permanent work but his father died suddenly (in his home village of Tysoe in Warwickshire) soon after they got to Perth and family stories suggest that Florence struggled with the heat and humidity. She was pregnant with their second child when they set sail to return to England in the spring of 1913. Five weeks after arriving back in this country my uncle James Dennis was born. A month later Florence died at her parents' home in Bloxham at the age of 31, leaving Joe with a baby and a child under three. He married his second wife Maud Guy (my mother's stepmother) in about 1916. Their daughter Elsie Evelyn was born in about 1918.