**SATURDAY AFTERNOON WINDOW SHOPPING IN WATFORD**

**By Dave Taylor-Jones**

When I was about seventeen years old, I used to spend Saturday afternoons either going to watch Watford FC play football with my friend Peter Hancock, or if they had an away fixture, we would go window shopping in Watford High Street. Both of us were rather fashion conscious young men, and in 1962, as we were both at work, we could afford to save up for a new suit, an overcoat or new shoes. There was great pleasure to be had in looking in the windows of the men’s outfitters and imagining what we would look like in the clothes which we fancied. But as we didn’t earn much we only bought very occasionally, after long weeks of looking and trying to make decisions.

At this time the Shopping Mall did not exist and the only place to buy new clothes were the High Street shops. Watford was a town of about 75,000 people and had a long High Street which started in the Lower High Street. This part of the High Street was of not much interest to us, as it was an area of electrical repair shops, garages and petrol stations – no clothes shops. After Watford High Street station, going up the hill past the wonderful Cramer’s toy shop, whose window I had pressed my nose to ever since I was a little kid to gaze in awe at the model planes and trains, the shops started to get much more interesting. Just before Water Lane, on the left-hand side was a Jewish tailor who always had new stock and featured a lot of rather Italian influenced designs. Some of the jackets were so short, they were called “bum freezers” and were considered rather daring. Peter and I would stand in the shop’s plate glass entrance foyer, looking at the jackets, and the owner used to try hard to attract us inside, but we never bought anything there - it was too flash for us.

We would then saunter on up the High Street, past Rossi’s Ice Cream Bar to Burton’s on the corner of Queen’s Road. Now here things began to get more serious. Burton’s had made-to-measure suits and overcoats of quality. However, my first suit was bought in 1961 from John Colliers and was a dark graphite grey, single-breasted affair. I know it was a bit sombre, but I needed it for our dancing lessons at Oakley Studios, where Peter was joined by his girlfriend Julie, and I tagged along as we tried to learn how to dance. I think we stuck it out for a year. We progressed through the waltz, the quick-step (a bit more difficult) and then to the dreaded foxtrot. Pete and Julie made good progress as they were always dancing together and, hey let’s face it, they had a good sense of timing. For me of course, the whole reason to learn ballroom dancing was to meet girls. So being single, I always had a different partner, but rarely were they someone I liked dancing with. I am an average-sized guy, but I always seemed to get very tall or very small partners. The only dance that I really liked was the cha-cha-cha. At least in a dark suit I felt much more confident and could one-two cha-cha-cha, back-two cha-cha-cha away with the best of them.

Peter’s first suit was a double breasted grey and blue mix, slightly Italian – very “raz”. Peter had rather luxurious dark hair, which was slightly wavy, which he, like all of us at this time, combed back without a parting. With his wonderful smile and charm he did come over as slightly Italian. But, mind you, only when he wore the suit.

Christmas time in Watford was really special, as the town put up electric light decorations which, during the fifties and early sixties, always seemed to be the same ones. However, these garlands, which were suspended across the street, changed the town so much, and we always looked forward to them. After Queen’s Road the High Street got really busy with a Woolworth’s, Boots the Chemists, and a wonderful old fresh coffee shop, whose delicious aroma of coffee beans being roasted pervaded the street.

Then you came to where Peter lived in St Mary’s Road, just behind the old St Mary’s flint-stone church, which does not quite make it onto the High Street, but was located in a charming old square of alms houses and ancient pavements, which you accessed on your left just after Lyon’s Corner House. The old High Street seemed necked at this area and traffic squeezed through to arrive at an area where the old Watford Market used to take place. Here, where the road had been widened out in times before ours, the meat market used to take place. At that time, in the nineteen-sixties, there was too much motor traffic to keep it here, so it was displaced to be held behind a large department store called Cawdells. However, this widened area had better buildings around it, some with stonework and there were a couple of banks. Market Street, an important road joined the old market square, with Watford Post Office and a very nice pub called the Compasses next to it. A little further, on the right was the Gaumont Cinema, where Peter, Julie and I would go to see touring rock ‘n roll groups perform. Normally, of course, we went to the cinema on Saturday nights, if there wasn’t something else to do.

The aspect of the High Street changed after the Market Square. The shops were a bit larger and a little more prestigious. A few important banks, lawyers and estate agents were contained in cream stucco Georgian buildings. Just after Clarendon Road, with the Watford Palace Theatre, was one of our favourite record shops on the left just before the Fire Station, where we would spend long hours browsing the LPs. Peter had a wonderful collection of Elvis Presley and Everley Brothers LPs, which we would play on his Mum’s gramophone. The High street then continued past the Fire Station, and Clements, the largest department store in the town, and past the town car park to a more gracious road arrangement, where the shops were set back on the right hand side to allow an ornamental pond in front of the Odeon Cinema. Some of the shops were rather picturesque, situated in buildings probably constructed before the twentieth century. The High Street terminated in a roundabout in front of the Watford Town Hall.

Peter and I rarely went to this upper High Street area to window shop as they were few clothes shops, unless it was to go to the Odeon cinema or to Spivey’s sport shop.

Peter’s house at 84, St Mary’s Road was Victorian and terraced, with attractive coloured brickwork. His large extended family, who all lived around Watford, was always popping in to see their parents at the weekends. For me it was a sort of haven in the town. Although it was a small house it had a special atmosphere, friendly and open. Mrs. Hancock always had time for a word with me and a cup of tea was always offered. Their lounge had a coal fire that was always giving off a friendly blaze, and there was that wonderful radiogram to play all our favourite records.

When I was at Victoria Secondary Modern School with Peter, it was just too risky to leave my bike in the cycle sheds – it would be stripped in a day. So Peter’s Mum allowed me to keep it in their tiny back garden during the school days, after I had cycled the three miles from my home to school. So I would arrive at about 8.40 AM and walk to school with Peter. I think it was these walks every day to school and back, and the little stop-over at his house that defined our friendship, which was to last for the rest of our lives.

After we left school and started work, Peter in Watford and me in London, it was at the weekends that I, like Peter’s older brother and sisters who were all married with their own children, used to pop in when we were in the town. Sometimes I would stay over with Peter on Saturday night and we would spend a hilarious evening eating grapefruits in bed and keeping his parents awake with our barely-contained laughter.

But back to the window shopping! My first overcoat was a light grey, fine wool one that boarded almost on being light blue. It was about knee length. Peter’s was a grey fleck one which was quite short, in the modern style. Overcoats only got shorter in the sixties, it wasn’t until the early seventies that they got longer and started to scrape the ground. Ties were a big fashion statement and at this time were quite thin with horizontal stripes of patterned colour. You had to have quite a few of them to alternate with your suit. At one time, woolen crocheted ties became the rage, made of loose stitches of thick wool. To save money, my Mum hand made me several. Just after I started work, I sat down in an Italian restaurant in Queensway and my crochet tie fell in my minestrone soup. It drained the bowl almost immediately.

There was a wonderful feeling after purchasing your new clothes in going back to Peter’s house, and trying them on before Mrs. Hancock and Jennifer, Peter’s young sister. You felt accomplished and not young, more of a man. Julie, Peter’s girlfriend had a Saturday job in a shop, so at the end of the day she would often be there to approve of our latest possessions. I think for Peter and I, sharing the choices that we made together, was a way of deepening our friendship. Years later, when I moved to Nice in the South of France, Peter and Julie used to come on holiday and sometimes Peter and I would go to a large shopping mall called *Cap Trois Milles* and tour the shops, trying on clothes, just like we had thirty years before.

Peter’s Dad seemed to be always working when I visited, but I remember him being there a couple of times. He invited me into their tiny front room and put some Hawaiian music on his wind-up gramophone. He would play along to the music with some bones, which were polished cream flat ones, which he held in a special way in his hands. He clicked them very fast in time to accompany the music. He was really good on the bones and had a special talent. He introduced me to Django Reinhardt, the great jazz guitarist – I will never forget him playing “Nuages” and clicking along to the music expertly.

I have lived most of my adult life in Europe, in Belgium, Holland, Germany and France. During the seventies these countries often tried to make pedestrian centres in their smaller towns, which are of similar size to Watford, saving the best buildings and keeping the architecture authentic. In this way they have banished cars and other traffic from the centre of the town and made underground car parks nearby. Yes it’s expensive, but it importantly maintains the town’s identity.

I am not very pleased with how Watford developed in the seventies and later. Many charming aspects were sacrificed in the interests of town planning and traffic circulation. I don’t really like how it looks now, although the top part of the town has recently been made pedestrian to good effect. Well done Watford for this change, but I would like to see all the old High Street from Water Lane onwards, made pedestrian also.

Personal memories are important when you get older. They evoke the passing of time, but let’s not forget that it’s your time, a period that was a part of your life. Watford was a good town to be young in during the early sixties, because what had formed it architecturally was still very evident. It is a large Hertfordshire market town, with a long past. However, appreciating architecture which is from our own time is a bit like choosing antiques. We can quite easily be very attracted to something from an era previous to ours. However, old things are often safe choices, while things from our own time aren’t always easy to like. They don’t always attract us. Modern artifacts don’t always hold the same appeal as old antique ones, yet our children will appreciate them in a different way. I am convinced this is because they are not from their time.

I think I prefer my childhood memories of Watford. But that nostalgic opinion probably holds good for just about all our parents and forebears – they probably didn’t like some of the changes that happened in their time either. Perhaps they preferred their past times too? I think that’s why, when you’re older, memories cocoon us into believing that our early times were better than the present one we are living in.

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