

PEOPLE HEADINGLEY



Edward Grocock 1869-1956
Grocer

For almost the whole of the last century, Grocock's the Grocers was a feature of the row of shops along the west side of Otley Road in the heart of Headingley, its white awning marking its position at no31. It finally closed in January 1990, the end of an era for this family business which had survived two world wars and a revolution in shopping habits.

Edward Grocock, the founder of the Headingley shop, first came to Headingley in the 1890s, when he was in his twenties. He had been brought up in the grocery trade. His father Henry John Grocock had first come to Leeds from Leicestershire in 1864, when he was 28, one of the many incomers to this booming town on the look out for a good business opportunity – feeding the growing mass of the population seemed to offer a guaranteed ticket to success. He advertised for a position in the grocery business, and set up shop in George Street, in the centre of town just behind the newly-built Town Hall. He found a house in St Peter's Square, and was able to afford a serving girl to help his wife – he was prospering. However a terrible family tragedy changed his life and in 1872 he sold his business and offered his house to let. He became a commercial traveller in the provisions trade, often staying in lodgings. It is not clear what happened to his young son Edward, only two at the time, but he was perhaps cared for by Henry's younger brother Samuel Thomas, who had followed him to Leeds and within a few years opened his own grocery shop in Marsh Lane. Over the next twenty years he expanded and opened two more branches of Grocock's grocery in town. His upward progress had its bumpy moments: in 1883 he was fined (along with several other grocers) for mixing 'foreign fat' into his butter – the adulteration of food was an ongoing problem in the town.



Maybe Edward began his working life in one of his uncle's shops, but in his twenties, perhaps when he married, he moved out of town to the rapidly-expanding, pleasant suburb of Headingley and took a job in a grocery shop which was already well established in the main road, belonging to George Foster. The shop was in a prime position, with stables behind for the donkey and cart needed for the deliveries. When George Foster retired Edward bought the shop himself and set up as a high-class grocer, specialising in top-quality provisions and 'fancy groceries, delicious teas and noted coffees', as he proudly advertised. There was plenty of competition: the Co-op just a few doors away (where Oxfam is now - look out for the foundation stone at ground level and the date stone high above), and William Butler 'The Practical Grocer' round the corner in North Lane, but he established an upmarket, quality image which attracted many of the residents of this wealthy suburb. In 1955, when he was 86, he was interviewed by the *Leeds Evening News* and recollected his early years in 'the village', when the horse trams were still running, his customers called in their carriages behind prancing pairs of horses, the maidservants came to order whole hams, and payment was made in guinea sovereigns.

Edward Grocock retired in 1935 and the shop was taken over by his son Cyril and later by Cyril's son, Alan. They went on living in the family home, on the corner of Kirkstall Lane and Headingley Mount. The shop retained much of its atmosphere - the original gleaming brass scales, the sides of bacon waiting to be sliced, the wicker baskets with samples of cereal and dried fruit in the window, the range of provisions from all over the world, the order boxes ready to be filled and delivered. Its reputation for friendly personal service and quality was maintained, while every effort was made to keep up-to-date, but in 1990 there was no-one ready to carry on the tradition and so it finally closed [it's now a charity shop].



The shop is still remembered locally with affection, and has even been celebrated by the poet Lucy Newlyn in her book *Ginnel* (Oxford Poets, 2005) in a poem called 'Comfortable Box' [reproduced below], where the delivery of the plump, ordered, carefully packed box from Groockocks is seen as an essential element in her Headingley childhood. Few grocers' shops can have received such poetic recognition!

Eveleigh Bradford

Local Historian 2011

The original article is on The Thoresby Society website, at <https://www.thoresby.org.uk/content/people/arthington.php>

Lucy Newlyn
Comfortable box

Nothing so cheerfully compact
as the full fat cardboard box
delivered Fridays, proudly stacked
by our man from Grocock's.

All the groceries in reassuring
rows and labelled layers,
their clean edges touching
flush, like days on calendars.

Every packet, carton, tin and jar
pronouncing regularity and order:
frugal plenty parcelled out, as far
as Friday next, or further -

like months of earnings
laid end to end to end;
or rationed treats and savings
paid their final dividend.

Plain as the lettering
on squares sitting side by side,
all our comings and goings
are here centred, simplified.

I can no more remember Friday
without this comfortable box
than home without Headingley
or childhood without Grocock's.

From Lucy Newlyn, *Ginnel* (2005),
reproduced by kind permission
of Carcanet Press, Manchester, UK