

The shop on the bend on Fore Street, next to the Golden Lion

Frank Rowe took over the shop on the corner, next to the Golden Lion, that was known as the paper shop in the 1920s. It was run as a tobacconist, newsagent and confectionery shop for the next 50 years by the Rowe family - Frank and Kate Rowe for 25 years and their sons, Peter and Jack, for a period before Jack purchased the bakery shop across the road and Peter carried on the business on his own.

Port Isaac was completely different then to today. Most of the population lived at the bottom of the village and the busiest period for the shop was from October to February/March. There were very few tourists and during the summer months many of the local men were working away on yachts and other seafaring jobs. They would return for the herring fishing season in September and during the next five months takings in the shop would be considerably higher. Saturday evening was the busiest time of the week when many local farmers would come to do their weekly shopping and the fishermen, being paid on Saturday, would spend their money and Kate Rowe would be open until 10pm. The streets were lit by oil lamps and the shops by oil and candlelight.

The newspapers arrived directly from London to Port Isaac Road Station and were collected by Prout Bros bus until Frank bought his own car.

One of the main sales in the shop was paraffin for heaters and fishing boat engines. In retrospect, the paraffin was stored in an extremely dangerous manner in two-hundred gallon containers in the cellar below the shop. One of two of the containers were open topped and so the fumes permeated through the house and tainted any milk products - only noticed by a guest! The paraffin was sold in five-gallon drums to the fishermen and these were stacked outside the shop door to be collected, having been brought up from the cellar. We accessed the cellar down some dangerous steps from the road and one particular evening a local lady was feeling her way along the wall in the dark on her way to Church when she fell down the step and injured herself quite badly.

During the war years, Frank Rowe was an auxiliary coastguard and fisherman and my mother, Kate, ran the shop, which was practically empty of stock due to rationing. One amusing incident was when workmen came and dug three, three foot deep square holes in the road outside the shop, being the narrowest part of Fore Street, and then deposited three, six foot girders by the wall. The holes had square covers on them and my father was instructed to rush out when the German tanks came up the beach, remove the covers and drop the steel girders in the holes, forming tank traps! He laughed and wondered what was to stop the enemy doing the same thing - in reverse!

Living so close to the harbour, us boys never missed a thing that was washed in on the beach by the tide from the tragedy of cargo ships being sunk out at sea. Once the beach was covered in chocolate, melting in the sun and ruined by the salt water, but still an attraction to the local dogs who ate it until they were ill. On another occasion, boxes of cigars were lying everywhere and on another, hundreds of unopened condoms were floating in the pools and strewn on the beach - some boys thought they were balloons and couldn't understand why the grown-ups didn't approve when they blew them up! To us kids, the real treasure was containers of iron rations for front line troops, which always included barley sugar.

One day, a large floating object, about six feet high, was deposited on the high water just under our window. It made a grand climbing object for us children until it was reported and inspected and found to be a foreign mine with enough explosives to flatten the bottom of the village!

A bit of history about the building

The age of the building is unknown, but by the construction it must be older than the Golden Lion, which was built in 1715. Some of the walls are pure cob-earth and straw - and some parts contain old ship's timbers. The cellar (where the paraffin was stored) was used, up to the turn of the twentieth century, as a place for barking the fishing nets to preserve them. The nets were fed through a hole in the back wall that is still there, and put into a copper boiler that contained boiled tree bark. The water was supplied from a well in the cellar that is still there. The nets were then fed out through a hole in the front of the building and taken by horse and cart up to the drying racks standing outside the Boathouse Stores (which was the original Lifeboat House).

As a boy it was great to live in the centre of the village where most things happened. Father could look out to the harbour to check on his boat and, especially at Christmas, I could lie in bed and listen to the men singing outside the pub - I never dreamt it would be me one day!

