



Buying Local - A Family Tradition

by Nicola Burnell



When I was growing up in the suburban town of Urmston, England, all shopping was local. We had everything we needed right on our doorstep. I don't recall car rides to the giant grocery store, or waiting in line at the checkout, or getting lost in a maze of bright aisles that offered dizzying choices of the same item, over and over again.

I remember the smell of the seasons changing as I walked into town, the sound of the vendors' voices yelling out their prices at the outdoor market, the feeling of familiarity that met me at every step of my weekly shopping trip, which never felt like a chore.

In addition to being 'cleaning day', Saturday was also 'shopping day' in my family. While the kitchen linoleum was still wet from 'a damn good mopping', and the air was heavy with wooden furniture polish, my sisters and I would prepare for our weekly shopping trip.

This was before the days of throw away plastic bags, so we'd each grab a handful of reusable shopping bags from the hook on the back of the door to the cupboard under the stairs (yes, like the one in Harry Potter), stuff our shopping lists into our pockets and begin the 10-minute trek into town.

We headed up the gentle slope of Station Road. We'd pass Whittaker's Fish & Chip shop, our mouths watering from the aroma of fried fish, vinegar soaked chips, and meat-and-potato pasties. We'd pass by Gregg's bakery, where sticky 'bee stings' and 'neopolitans' oozed confectioner's custard onto doilled plates. We'd pass the corner sweet shop where candy was sold by the ounce and poured into triangular white paper bags that fit in the hand like an ice cream cone.

Although I was not yet a vegetarian, I'd instinctively suck in my breath as we approached the butcher's shop, not wanting to inhale the stench of blood combined with bleach.

My sisters and I would separate at the top of the hill where Station Road crosses Railway Road. One of us headed for Silcocks, the green grocer shop which always smelled like apples and dirt; another for Kershaws the chemist, where the tanned linoleum was so cushioned it sank underfoot. The lucky one of us would cross the street to Urmston outdoor market.

I loved going to the market. It was like watching a live recording of a television show. Unlike today's farmers' markets, which operate seasonally and change locations, Urmston Market has been open three days a week, in the same location, for decades. Over the years, the vendors have handed down their stalls to their children, some of whom I went to school with.

Railway Road Entrance to Urmston Market

Entering by the Railway Road gate, my first stop was typically the baker's stall for potato pancakes and a wholemeal loaf, before they sold out. The family that ran this stall was very friendly and often had my order bagged by the time it was my turn to be served. In the winter, I'd drop my handful of coins into the cold palm of the baker's wife, protected only by woolen fingerless gloves which were sold in one of the other stalls on the market.

On Mother's Day, I'd buy my mother a bouquet of Freesia from the flower man whose stall



was next to the Greenfield Road entrance. It was impossible for me to stand in front those buckets of fragrant spring flowers without glancing over the fence to what used to be Cottage Hospital, where I was born. Although the hospital closed in 1980 I still felt an affectionate connection to the place.

Back-to-school meant a visit to the Marks & Spencer 'seconds' stall, where a red bearded man helped us figure out how many sizes we'd grown since the previous September. Despite the sudden surge in his business, (all the kids bought their school clothes from him), the man remained patient and helpful. I suspect he had a little crush on my mother because he always 'threw in' a pair of socks or reduced the price of the shirts.

Haggling was definitely an acceptable part of the market shopping experience, especially toward the end of the day, when the vendors were eager to unload the contents of their stalls. I can remember doing all my Christmas shopping for less than five pounds because I bargained for every item I bought.

Perhaps the only downside of going to the market was having to haul the shopping bags home. There were times when I felt like my arms were going to fall out of their sockets. The walk back down Station Road was particularly tough when the pavement was icy. I knew where the worst ice patches would be and did my best to avoid them, but sometimes the bags were unevenly packed and the butt-meets-ice moment was inevitable.

The best part of the shopping trip was the final stop at the corner sweet shop for two ounces of candy. I often bumped into one, or all of my sisters at the counter, our shopping trips averaging similar times to complete. There is no memory sweeter than standing in front of rows of glass jars of colorful sweets and trays of chocolate. With our shopping bags pooled at our feet, my sisters and I would negotiate what to buy, making sure that we each bought something different so we could share our sweet Saturday supplies.



Homemade Bread

Once home, the kettle was put on for tea and the potato cakes were browned under the toaster, then smothered with butter. With the house clean and the pantry filled, Saturday afternoon was then ours to do with as we pleased.

When I think about shopping now, I am haunted by thoughts of sprinting around the grocery store, list in hand, on my way home from work. I rarely go shopping on Saturdays, and hardly ever recognize the faces of the vendors who sell to me in the big grocery stores. I am happy to see the return of the reusable shopping bag, but I really miss the sense of community I enjoyed when I went shopping in my own neighborhood, as

a child.

That said, I believe the era of shopping local is returning to my adopted home on Cape Cod. I have found that I do recognize the faces at Trader Joe's, in Hyannis, where I buy all of my dairy, coffee, veggies and cakes, (I couldn't possibly give those up!) I also know the names of the people I buy my gifts from in Dennisport and Harwichport. I am learning the location of my local farmers' markets, and take the time to chat with the vendors about their stalls and their family businesses. I confess that I still fly around the chain stores, when I need certain supplies, but I am happy to say that for me, buying local is no longer such a distant memory.

Nicola Burnell Nicola@capewomenonline is a freelance writer, editor and Publisher of this magazine. She also teaches Reiki, Personal Empowerment workshops, novel writing & creativity development classes. She also works as a personal and professional consultant.

Nicola is a member in Letters of the National League of American Pen Women <http://www.nlapw.org> and an active participant in the Cape Cod Time Bank <http://www.capecodtimebank.org> She lives in Harwich with her two teenage sons and several pets.

