



Christmas at Beale's

The whole of north London seemed to descend on Beale's store in Holloway with money to burn on Christmas eve, recalls John Beale, the store founder's grandson

Beale's had always come into its own at Christmas. To a large extent, it lived for Christmas, far more so than was good for its health. Its wares were regarded as expensive but, at Christmastime, one could afford the best.

It was exciting and enjoyable for all, even for the staff who worked almost until they dropped, for little if any overtime pay. It was uneconomic because each family stocked up with such an absurd quantity of food and drink that trade was virtually at a standstill for weeks after.

In the mid-1930s, Christmas was the main event in the Holloway calendar. No sooner was Easter over than the Christmas crackers and novelties had to be ordered from Tom Smith's, Sparagnapane's and other suppliers, for the Bazaar which was held in the Grand Hall during the week before Christmas.

Fancy and 'free' goods

Next we would visit Messrs Mansell, Hunt and Catty, and other showrooms, to select small china figures of Father Christmas, snowmen, eskimos on sleighs, miniature houses, churches and castles, together with holly pickets, robins, coloured paper frills (with tartan patterns for shortbreads and Dundee cakes), silver cake boards and cardboard boxes in different shapes and sizes for the Christmas cakes.

Fancy picture boxes, ribbons, gold thread and wrapping papers were needed for our own chocolates and, in early summer, huge orders would be placed for

Beale's staff bought from Mansell, Hunt Catty & Co well ahead of Christmas

fancy tins of biscuits and shortbreads from Huntley and Palmer, MacFarlane Laing, Peak Frean and others.

In August, samples of dried fruits began to arrive by every post from Mincing Lane merchants. After careful inspection for quality, price and cleanliness (for stalks and stones were often included free, especially from Persia and Turkey), contracts would be placed for currants, sultanas, raisins and cut peel for the making of our own mincemeat, Christmas puddings and fruit cakes. And woe betide us if we forgot to order pudding basins, cloths and wrappers, in four sizes, at the same time.

Planning for the frenzy

Everything was so ridiculously complicated – so many shapes and sizes and varieties of goods, so many items to be ordered, received, checked, sorted, stored, requisitioned, transferred, charged, used and finally sold. Only the cheapness of labour made it possible at all and, in the end, it could only be marginally profitable at best.

Detailed plans were made early for Christmas production in the bakeries. Dundee cakes would be baked in the last week of November, followed by

Christmas cake bases, then lighter fruit cakes and madeiras. Later would come the swiss rolls which were set on thin oblong silver cake boards and decorated with chocolate fudge, holly pickets, robins, and mottoes, as "Yuletide Logs". These were a must in most customers' homes.

By October, the chocolate department would be in full swing. A regular order of up to one 1,000 one-pound boxes of chocolates, given by the directors of Ever-Ready Batteries to their staff, added to the pressure on this small department.

It was all very small beer, of course, compared with modern large-scale factory production. But no one working at Holloway at Christmas could have thought of it as such – certainly not the poor storeman man-handling some 20 tons of raw materials in a day, with the harassed despatch manager driving an equally massive outflow of manufactured goods through the same yard in the opposite direction.

Mechanical aids to the man-handling were minimal. Though the 140lb bags of flour were pulled up tediously on an old-fashioned chain hoist, they had to be carried to the correct dump on a man's shoulders. In earlier days, incredibly, a sack of flour weighing 280lbs was carried by one man.

As the last days arrived, the regular staff, augmented by a host of extras in the shape of housewives, country cousins, city clerks and students, worked steadily to the final frenzy of Christmas Eve, when the whole of north London seemed to descend upon us with money in its pocket.

The piles of chocolate boxes and the gaily coloured crackers began to disappear from the Grand Hall, which was enlivened (questionably) by a three-piece orchestra playing mournfully in a corner

We had always specialised in fresh cream cakes and cream moulds, and the last 24 hours were given to the filling and decoration of these – hoping and praying that the weather would not turn warm and muggy, for the cold stores could not accommodate a quarter of the production. Customers would come from miles around to buy our strawberry and vanilla creams, “S and Vs” as we called them, made from fresh dairy cream, calves’ foot jelly, vanilla from the pod and our own strawberry puree.

In the meat department, fine white turkeys and geese, many with prize-winning rosettes on their gorgeous breasts, hung on every inch of rail. In an outbuilding at the rear, a party of old-timers, half buried in feathers, sat plucking and gutting the poultry, bullied both by the head butcher with his waiting queue of customers and by the despatch manager desperately trying to catch the last van to Tottenham. Another butcher churned out endless strings of pork sausages on a cumbersome hand-turned machine.

The fruit and vegetable department had stocked up well with fancy packs of figs, dates, muscatels and almonds, walnuts, chestnuts and boxes of tangerines wrapped in silver paper. Yellow and white chrysanthemums and Christmas roses added to the show. Out of sight but of no less importance were the more humble King Edward potatoes and the Brussels sprouts.

The grocers made up several hundred parcels of groceries for the Mayor to distribute to the poor of Islington. They consisted of humdrum packets of rice, prunes, sugar, tea and the like, and supplied practically at cost. Even so, I remember that the rice was of less than our usual quality to get down to the required price. It could hardly be described as festive fare.

On display for more affluent Islingtonians were familiar round boxes of Metz fruits, orange and



lemon slices, Chinese figs, candied peel, crystallised ginger, jars of stem ginger and other dainties.

Down in the basement, coffee roasting was taking place, adding its own distinctive aroma – though once or twice the roaster must have nodded off awhile, until the smell of burnt coffee beans sent the manager flying down the stairs to wake the culprit up.

Packed with customers

The piles of chocolate boxes and the gaily coloured crackers began to disappear from the Bazaar in the Grand Hall. This was a comparatively quiet area that had to be enlivened (questionably) by a three-piece orchestra playing mournfully in a corner.

Down in the store, queues for the holiday bread built up early on Christmas Eve and, by 10 o’clock, the whole ground floor would be packed solid. I myself would be on my feet from morning till night, rushing madly from top to bottom of the six-storey building.

The task of our faithful despatch manager, Mr Norton, approached nightmare proportions on the night before Christmas Eve. Had he collapsed

Hot work in Beale’s bakery: queues for holiday bread built up early on Christmas eve

with fatigue, as well he might, utter chaos would have ensued. One despaired that the sorters and roundsmen could ever get it cleared in time.

But somehow, by 10 o’clock on Christmas Eve, all but a handful of baskets, where the customer had not been at home, had been safely delivered. And, in those far-off conscientious days, it was a point of honour not to let a customer down. Even the directors would set out on Christmas morning to deliver the last mislaid order, or perhaps to satisfy some late-ordering Scrooge with his turkey.

Yet, with all its economic foolishness, I still look back with pride to the old store as it appeared at Christmas. I can recall with pleasure the fairytale atmosphere of the decorated windows and counters, piled high with good things ready for the onslaught of happy children and their parents. From the point of view of service to the public, perhaps they were our finest hours. ■

Many thanks to Andrew Beale – William’s great-great grandson – for allowing us to reproduce this extract from *Minding Our Own Business*, his history of Beale’s of Holloway