

## Reminiscences of a Christopher Chemist Shop apprentice

by Jenny Offler

I was first apprenticed to Mr Christopher in 1953. I worked from 9 - 6.15 Monday to Saturday with an hour for lunch and a half day on Wednesdays. My starting wage was £1.50 per week.

I was told I was fortunate to be paid as in years gone by parents paid him a premium to train as an apprentice.

One of my jobs as the apprentice was to clean and fill with paraffin the two round black oil heaters, these two heaters were the sole source of heat in the shop.

The jars on the shelves behind the counter were dusted every day, three shelves a day.



Mr Christopher never bought any thing he could manufacture himself so an apprenticeship with him was very extensive, in the 1950s we still made small quantities of pills with a hand pill machine, we also dispensed capsules, the gelatine halves were bought in which we filled with powder ourselves.

A metal mortar was kept in cellar this was used for pounding the ingredients for tinctures.

All the water used in dispensing was filtered through an earthenware filter, which had to be kept topped up.

The local townspeople often came to see Mr Christopher rather than visit their doctor, and he had a very comprehensive list of his own remedies.

We had quite a few customers in outlying villages, Limpley Stoke, Freshford etc. They either phoned or posted their order, which we assembled, packed and posted to them.

Doctors are notoriously bad writers and the Chemist and Druggist, the trade magazine, ran a competition each month for the most unreadable prescription. Mr Christopher sent in a prescription from a Bradford doctor and won 5 shillings much to his amusement.

As well as medicines Mr Christopher produced other things; the best known was his curry powder which was world famous. It was made in the shop and posted to many places including the House of Commons. I often mixed the curry powder which made me sneeze but I never knew the formula that was secret and I believe died with his daughter.

Another strange product was Vichy powder; we had a customer who lived in Kent who like Vichy water but was unable to obtain supplies. Mr Christopher had some analysed and made a powder which when mixed with tap water made Vichy water. We posted a supply to Kent about once a month. The jar was then returned to refill, the same jar used for the seven years I worked at Christopher's.

We also made Bath salts. These were made with water softening crystals which were placed in a shallow bowl and sprayed with a "flit pump" to add colour and perfume.

we mixed spirit and oils to make a perfume. It was very pale green in colour and called Siva.

Hair tonic and Pine shampoo and tooth powder were other things made and packed in the shop, the shampoo we supplied to several local boarding schools.



We packed all our own packed goods in paper parcels, things like Bicarb of Soda, Arrowroot and Epsom salts.

Four of us worked in the shop including Mr Christopher and his daughter, we had an errand boy that did deliveries on a bicycle with a large basket at the front. He came after school and on Saturdays when he cleaned all the brass mortars and scales. He also returned medicine bottle, recycling is not new.

We had a wine licence which was of course limited to just a few hours a day.

There was a still in the cellar, which was used to distill water; this was sold for car batteries, steam irons and also used in dispensing.

We made Saunders Syrup a cough mixture for adults, this contained treacle, which came in one-gallon containers. We also made children's and babies cough mixtures all to Mr Christopher's own formulae.

We made and packed powders for humans and animals [such as] Christopher's Lincolnshire Pig Powders.

It was amazing just what was sold in pharmacies in the 1950s. We sold cyanide to destroy wasp nests and farmers bought strychnine to destroy vermin, we had to know the customer and they signed to poison register.



There were no screw top bottles, only corks, if the cork was too large it was softened in a cork press to make it fit. Pills and tablets were dispensed in boxes.

Labels were all hand written and all bottles had to be wrapped, no bags. We had two qualities of wrapping paper: one for the N.H.S. and another for private customers.

The N.H.S. prescriptions were sealed with Sellotape, the private prescriptions with sealing wax, a small gas jet burned continually for melting the wax.

At Christmas the office leading from the shop was transformed into the Christmas show room. Display stands were put in place to show the gift boxes and other goods available, customers were invited to view the display and select their Christmas gifts.

In the summer the carboys (the large glass bottles full of coloured water that are often see in chemist windows) would act as a lens in the sun, several people had holes burned in their clothes when standing by them.