

Town Jubilee Mayor but never The Mayor of Kendal Borough

Bill Stewart was born in 1915 and interviewed in 1995

I'd just finished school at fourteen and my brother-in-law had developed TB and was in Meathop. I came to Kendal on the Anglo-Scottish Coach Company to keep my sister company. Not being of independent means I looked around to find some way of supporting myself. I saw an advert in The Gazette for an errand boy required at George Barrow & Son in the Market Place. I worked there from 1930 until the day war broke out in 1939.

When I arrived I found a strange town with strange ideas. I couldn't see the reason for old ladies going about collecting milk in jugs until I was told "It isn't milk it's beer they've got." They've been to the bottle and jug department.

A lot of people lived in yards, there were no council house estates. An old builder took me into Abbot Hall Square and I was flabbergasted to find that the bedrooms at the back didn't have windows but slots in the wall to look through.

That was the very thing I spent years trying to improve when I was on the Council – housing and health.

People thought the old yards were attractive but not very attractive if you lived in one. When you think maybe three families, sharing one toilet down the end of the yard. In the 1931 clearance scheme Kirkbarrow came into being of course The first Council houses were on Castle Grove and Underley. The firm's traveller had left, and my boss thought I was perhaps a little bit young to go travelling for a firm of wholesale grocers, but I said I could and started travelling which meant of course visiting Windermere, Ambleside, Kirkby Stephen, Kirkby Lonsdale, Grange and so on. I travelled, for a start, by bus.

War came. I was in St John Ambulance and was initiated into the 'Crown Reserves.' There was no pay attached to this. War was declared on Sunday and I got my call up papers the following Saturday. Two days later I caught the twenty minutes to ten train to York and that's how I came to join the army. I joined on Monday September 4th 1939 and was demobbed on November 17th 1945 and spent a year in the wholesale trade and then in 1947 I joined, working full time, in the Kendal Borough Ambulance Service later transferred to the Westmorland County Ambulance service for ten years.

Then two of the most important things happened to me in my life. I got married to Joyce in 1948 and we went in to the greengrocery business having bought a shop. Which Joyce ran until I left the ambulances in 1957.

And the advent of the National Health Service which of course everybody wanted "It's free!!" and of course dentists and opticians were running day and night until poor old Nye Bevan, who launched it, left the Ministry because they were imposing a charge. I have found out you should never ever give something for nothing. They never appreciate it.

There was a bye-election for the Borough Council and I was always interested in the hospital service. I stood as an independent and in my electioneering paper I said that I considered the hospital service was inadequate. Along with Michael Jopling, our MP we went down to meet Lord Aberdare, the Minister of State, but nothing happened. Then following much discussion the Chairman of the Northern Regional Health Authority, Sir George Chetwyn said "What you need is a brand new hospital." So that was the beginning of the Westmorland General Hospital and you combine Westmorland County, Meathop and Kendal Green under one roof. Then came the disastrous change in local government in 1974. They said to us "You're over 20,000 population and not entitled to a Mayoralty" and we said "We're a very ancient borough and special connection with the Crown with a sword of honour and stuff given" We

got that thanks to my old friend Percy Duff. I can remember Sir Sanderson Temple coming to the Quarter Sessions as the Town's solicitor and he got the Citizenship that we are allowed to give – the highest honour- and the Mayoralty and all the wonderful customs plus the stuff in the Mayor's Parlour but we had to fight for them.

I was Town Mayor, Jubilee Mayor, in 1977 to '78 but never Mayor of Kendal Borough.

Over the years I have come across a number of Kendal characters. Frankie Cunningham was probably the best known. He was brought up hard and did very well when he worked for the Wilson brothers in the scrap yard. Both those lads died in their early 50s and I think their influence on Frankie didn't do a lot after that.

I was getting out of my car one day just outside Booths in Highgate and I nearly stepped on him and he says, he always addressed me as "Jim," and he said "Eh Jim lend me twenty pence." I said "Francis that is a very reasonable amount to ask for but why sin your soul by asking me to lend you twenty pence which you have no intention of paying me back." He looked at me and said "Well give me a quid."

On another occasion a man was with his grandchild and he says to me "Have you got twenty pence" and I gave him 20p and straight away he gave it to the kid to "get some sweets." And I said I could have given my own grandchild twenty pence,"

Another character was a little bloke lived down south-east Highgate and somebody evidently used to give him cast off clothing 'cos he used turn out very neatly very smart on occasions. On this particular day he was walking down Highgate with a maroon blazer, cream trousers with green socks, and they met just outside my shop. This lady was coming past and she said was obviously looking and Albert says "Are you wondering ma'am who that is?" and she said "Well he is....." she said Albert says ma'am says Albert "that is a very himportant personage" He has just arrived back. He was the main adjudicator at the Melbourne Olympics." "Well" she said "you never know who you're are running into now-a-days."

Dr Edgecombe was typical of the medical service in Kendal in his time. If a man or woman complained to him about an abdominal pain he would say. "Right get in the car. I'll take you up to the hospital I think you have an acute appendix here". He would take him or her up in the car and he would do the operation for free.

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