

Kenneth Hirst, (originally called Hirst and Sons)

Gentlemen's Outfitter

21 Alcester Road South, Kings Heath – by Diane Hirst 2015

My grandfather, who had a clothes shop called, I think, Bon Marche, in West Bromwich, set up two of his four sons in the early 1930s with shops of their own---my father's in Kings Heath and his brother Ray's in Stratford Road, Hall Green.



Hirst's on the corner of Drayton Road.

My parents and I lived in the two storey flat (now a Care Agency) over the shop until I was ten years old. The shop then was just the front part on Alcester Road, although part of the windows were in Drayton Road, with a small “fitting room” as they were then called----- I notice they're referred to as “dressing rooms” now ----at the far end. Via the fitting room and the shop was the main access to Alcester Road South and we tended to use this way out more than the Drayton Road entrance. Of course, if any customers were using the fitting room the little door from the flat above had to be locked.....

For many years there were two hairdressers, a gentlemen's and a ladies just up from this shop, in Drayton Road. When they ceased to trade, my father bought these two small units so that he could extend his own shop, this was probably in the late 50s. He now had more room to carry the

massive amount of stock which is essential to a successful business. There were enormous drawers in this back part, one set held many many fabric caps which sort of slotted into one another.



Hirst's on the corner of

Drayton Road.

Gentlemen regularly wore what were called (and I suppose are still called Trilbies) and the shop held a fine selection of these too. But the only hat I could find is a neat bowler and a top hat. The hatbox indicates that the bowler was made by Christie's of London and it seems to have a "by Royal Appointment" label. The top hat was made by Battersby. The (original) front shop had a glass topped counter with drawers galore of ties stacked underneath---very much like the Men's outfitters at the Black Country Museum

Ron Foster, whom many of you will remember and also his wife Ruth and daughters, Kathy (Lloyd Roberts), Jane and Alison, was manager of Kenneth Hirst for many years, I would say from the early to mid 50s until the shop finally closed and Pa retired in 1973. My father and Ron worked well together; they were good salesmen and knew the stock. Ron used to say "we *got to* do a Ton today!" This meant that they'd take at least £100, which sometimes took a bit of doing! Other sales assistants came and went including Gordon Suter and Geoff Rainbow.

21 Alcester Road South has served many purposes since...I recall Shipways Estate Agents, Dunkin Donuts, a beauty salon and now "Cinderellas", and no doubt some I've forgotten about. The interior hasn't changed radically, if you go through to the back part of Cinderellas, the little fitting room door, which had to be locked, can still be seen, also the door to the cellars below. I believe and Andy can probably verify this, that before it became an outfitter's it was a grocers.

I've brought along the original till, indeed the only till, there was a sort of proverb/maxim thing which went "If you change your till, you change your luck,"—well this would never do, the business was a successful one, though I think that had to more to do with buying the right stock and good salesmanship than good luck! You can play with the till if you wish, and find out for yourself what happens when you open it a little to get your hands inside it, and attempt to push the drawer back! The clothes were always wrapped in a brown paper parcel. Ron Foster was particularly adept at making a neat job of this. The paper was printed with the shop's name etc and tied with their string.