

Farewell to Colliers – by Diane Hirst 2015

Forty or fifty years ago, Kings Heath boasted a large number of independent, that is privately owned shops; now, I know that some of you here, like me, are not in their first bloom of youth, so what I'd like to hear from some of you veterans, is what KH shops do YOU remember with affection? Businesses have changed since these days of yore when there was individual attention and the staff actually knew their stock. Colliers ticked all these boxes and it wasn't until I talked to Peter Collier a few years ago, just before the shop closed in 2007 we think, that I realized that this family-owned and run shop has quite a history.

“Pop”, the father of Thomas Philip Collier, and grandfather of Philip and Peter, was in the licensing trade in Birmingham City Centre. He was first of all licensee of the Sir Charles Napier in Gooch Street which survives to this day. He next became licensee of The Grand Turk, the old Market Pub which was razed to the ground along with the Wholesale Market, to be re-built in virtually the same location, that is, near the site of the old Silver Blades ice-rink. Thomas Collier, born in 1920 and father of Philip and Peter, spent his teenage years in and around the markets as a “Barrow Boy”,

With the outbreak of the Second World War Tom went into the Hertfordshire Yeomanry, surviving the second phase of the D-Day landings and returning to civilian life in '46. For a short time, he worked in London, as what was obviously his natural calling-----a gentlemen's outfitter! For a few months he was manager of Fred Burns, a notable London store. Returning to Birmingham, he opened his first shop in Holloway Head.

Thomas Collier had become aware that there was a market for a new opening in Men's Clothing. The returning troops had been supplied with the ubiquitous De-mob suits but soon, for the first time in years, young men were looking to establish their own identity and Thomas Collier, recognizing this, jumped on the bandwagon when he was offered a large number of ex-army greatcoats, on the cheap! He knew several out-of-work tailors whom he set up in premises in Jamaica Row making trousers and modifying the ex-army clothing---fabric was hard to come by in those days. This was his first venture into the clothing trade on his own behalf--and how it was to take off!

But meanwhile, what had happened to Pop? He'd had to retire from the licensing trade, so, to "keep him out of mischief" Tom acquired for him a little shop in York Road, Kings Heath for tailoring purposes and it was this modest establishment, the first one in Kings Heath, to carry the name of Philip Collier!



Phillip Collier's original shop on the High Street was at 19 High Street (the right hand shop). They then purchased the 2 shops next door (21-23 High Street – just visible to the right)



Phillip Collier's shop at 21-23 High Street, Kings Heath next door to their original High Street shop.

The money he made from the restyled greatcoats gave Tom the opportunity to open more shops in the city centre. Once his Holloway Head shop was established, he was always on the look out for vacant premises and soon had several shops: Dale End, Bristol Street, Ethel Street, Worcester Street and his flagship shop

on the then newly constructed Smallbrook Queensway. Business mushroomed from then on and Philip Collier became a household word amongst discerning gentlemen and soon his shops were to be found in all parts of the West Midlands.....Coventry, Wolverhampton and later Solihull.....as well as the more local ones in Northfield, Saltley, Dudley Road, Stratford Road Sparkhill, and at one point he actually had three shops in Erdington. In his heyday, Tom was constantly on the look out for new openings...better locations, and, strangely in a Gent's Outfitters, unusual and distinctive shop fittings. Apparently he would scour the antique market for appropriate artifacts, such as animal heads, to "enhance" his shops! In 1954 he bought the property next door (in the Moseley direction) to the one which closed about 8 years ago. Sons, Philip and Peter, known to so many, worked at first in their father's shop, and it was they who bought the last one now in 1987. Business continued to boom, with the "boys" in charge and Thomas, who continued to work in the shop until his eightieth birthday, carried on taking an active interest and used the little gentlemen's hairdresser, an integral part of Collier's, at the back of the shop, almost up to his death in 2006. Many of the staff are affectionately remembered too, Ron Clarke was the tailor there for many years, Lewis Coley informed me that he made his wedding suit. Mille, the super efficient seamstress did the alterations from 1978 to when the shop closed and she remembers another Serbian tailoress. This was truly` family business to be proud of.