

Gatehouse Shopkeepers

Fishmongers - 31 High Street



Josie Gilchrist (front), John Wilson, Willie Wilson, Sheila Broadfoot, Harry Dugdale (from NZ)

A Brief Chronology

For about 55 years there was a fishmongers shop at 31 High Street, Gatehouse of Fleet.

1895 : Jardine & Palmer bought 31 High Street to be used as part of their drapery business which they ran from 27 & 29 High Street.

1938 : D.C. Cochrane, who ran a butchers shop across the road at 34 High Street bought 31 High Street, which he rented, probably to William Wilson, fishmonger.

1940/41 Girthon Valuation Roll : William Wilson, fishmonger, was the tenant at 31 High Street.

1962 Willie Wilson bought 31 High Street from D.C. Cochrane.

1985 Lizzie Wilson died.

1988 John Wilson took over running the family fishmongers.

1990 James and Patricia Watson bought the shop from which they sold fish and vegetables.

1992 Willie Wilson died.

1994 The Watsons sold the shop, and the fishmongers closed.

Willie Wilson

William Wilson , more often known as Willie or Wullie, was born in Lochmaben, Dumfriesshire in 1911, son of William Wilson, bowling green keeper and his wife Mary.

In 1938, at the King's Arms, Dumfries, Willie married Lizzie McDonald, daughter of Gatehouse blacksmith Robert McDonald and his wife Mary Henderson. Willie was a master fishmonger and was lodging at 27 Fleet Street. Lizzie lived with her parents at 1 Digby Street.

Before Willie married he is understood to have worked at Henderson's grocery shop at Horatio Square which was run by Andrew Henderson, an uncle of his future wife Lizzie. About the time of his marriage Willie took over the tenancy of 31 High Street and started the fishmonger and greengrocery shop.

The Shop

Sheila Broadfoot (now Mrs Wallace) worked in the shop for 11 years and most of the information below comes from her memories.

The shop had a double door and a large picture window. Behind the window was a large sloping stone slab where fish were displayed. These were kept cool by cold water which ran down the slope.

Inside the shop the serving counter was on the right hand side while the left side contained displays of fruit and vegetables.

The room beyond the shop was a store and the place where fish was filleted.

Refrigerator

The fridge was in the back shop and it filled the space from floor to ceiling. In those days it was called a “chill”. The upper part was just like a modern fridge. The lower part had large deep drawers where they kept salmon, cod and halibut, fish that had to be sliced up.

When penicillin and other new medicines came into general use in the 1940s, they had to be kept in a refrigerator. At the time few people in Gatehouse owned one, so Willie gave local doctor, Alexander Craig, a key for the fish shop so that he could store his medicines in the fridge and have access to them day or night.

Fish

Most fish had to be ordered by telephone before 2pm from Arklies of Aberdeen. The fish came in wooden boxes (packed with ice) which were transported by train to be collected the next morning at Tarff Station (about 6 miles from Gatehouse). The Wilson's collected fish in this way nearly every day and they also collected boxes of filleted haddock, sole and whiting which had been ordered by and were delivered to the Cally Hotel.

Mrs Wilson (Lizzie) usually drove the van to the station, leaving Gatehouse at 6 am accompanied by Sheila. If Lizzie was unable to go, Norah Henderson from the grocery shop would take her “wee car” to collect the fish, although it was a struggle to fit all the fish boxes into her car.

Sometimes the porter at Tarff Station would oversleep and the fish would stay on the train and continue to the end of the line at Kirkcudbright. The fish could then not be collected until the train came back up the line from Kirkcudbright to Tarff.

Kippers and herring came already filleted and ready for sale. Haddock, sole and whiting was delivered whole and was filleted in the back shop. Nothing was wasted. Fish bones were wrapped in newspaper and many people took them as cat food, putting tuppence in a bag for the British Legion charity in return. Cod lungs were ‘purchased’ in the same way, to be used in soup-making. Salmon heads were kept for customers to make paté and salmon paste. Lizzie would boil cod roe to be sold in slices. This was very popular and customers would dip slices in egg and then fry them.

The thrift at the fishmongers reflected the fact that things we take for granted today were not available then – no tinned soup, tinned cat food and no stock cubes.

Haddock was the most popular fish but there was also sole, whiting, cod, halibut, cod roe, herring and kippers. They did not sell shell fish.

The fish markets were closed for about a fortnight at Christmas and New Year so there was no fish available at that time.

Friday was the busiest day for fish as the Roman Catholics were expected to eat fish that day. Some of the fish was sourced more locally. Salmon and sea trout came from Carsluith, The stake

net fisherman at Cardoness also supplied trout and salmon. These fish were unavailable for sale on a Monday as it was law to keep the stake nets open on Sundays to help preserve stocks.

Fruit and vegetables

Most of the fruit and veg was delivered 2 or 3 times a week by van from a wholesaler. Apples, pears, plums, damsons and greengages were delivered in boxes, peaches in trays. Imported fruits included grapes which came loose in trays. Bananas came in wooden boxes known as 'boats'. The bananas were protected by straw which sometimes housed large spiders. Melons also came packed in straw in wooden boxes. Citrus fruits such as grapefruit and lemons came in crates as did the oranges which were in great demand for making marmalade. Soft fruits such as raspberries, strawberries and gooseberries were also delivered as they were not commercially grown locally. Tomatoes were delivered in 'chip' baskets (wooden boxes each with a metal handle).

Potatoes

Some potatoes were imported - such as Cyprus tatties which came in wooden boxes protected by peat. Other early potatoes such as those from Jersey also came in boxes. Local earlies were from Dromore, Wigtownshire and Ayrshire. Other potatoes came in hundredweight sacks.

Packaging

Nothing came pre-packed so all the products had to be weighed and bagged. **Fish** was weighed on scales which had a chart showing the price per pound for different types of fish. Once weighed the fish was placed on paper and then wrapped in newspaper for the customer. If trout or salmon was being sent some place it was wrapped in cabbage leaves or rhubarb leaves to keep it fresh. **Fruit and veg** were all packed in different ways. Rhubarb, cabbage, turnips and leeks were all wrapped in newspaper. **Plums, apples** of all sorts, and **pears** were sold in white paper bags. **Carrots, onions, peas and beans** were put in brown paper bags. The bags were strung together and hung on hooks near the till to be pulled off as needed. **Potatoes** had extra strong brown bags. The potatoes were weighted from their large sacks on large balancing scales in to weights of a stone, ½ stone and ¼ stone.

The shop also sold flowers.

Fresh flowers came from Cally Gardens and were kept fresh in buckets of water near the fish slab. Wreaths were made up to order by Jack Hastings from Kirkcudbright. At Armistice Day in November, poppy wreaths were ordered from the British Legion in Edinburgh.

Working in the shop

The fishmongers was a very busy shop – open 8am to 5pm Monday to Saturday. Thursday was a half day and there were occasional Monday holidays.

Although Thursday was a half day holiday in most Gatehouse shops, the fish shop remained open because it was a delivery day for goods sold at the weekend.

As well as Willie and Lizzie, other shop assistants who worked there at different times included **Olive Marshall, Mary Patterson and Elsie Proudlock. Sheila** joined the shop when she left school in 1958. **Bunty McKie** also worked at the shop and when she left **Josie Gilchrist** joined the staff.

It was a happy place to work and the Wilson's treated their staff like family.

Later **John Wilson** joined the staff as did his wife **Betty** after they married.

The fish van

The Wilsons ran a fish van around the local area – round the Fleet Valley, up to Gatehouse Station (once a fortnight), to Sandgreen, Rainton and Borgue, to Cardoness and Skyreburn.

They also sold from their van around the town twice a week.

The Skyreburn run on Wednesdays usually meant an enjoyable picnic lunch.

The Borgue run on a Thursday was a long one, often not finished until 7pm.

The van also sold fruit, vegetables and groceries. It was fitted with 4 long drawers which pulled out to display the goods for sale.

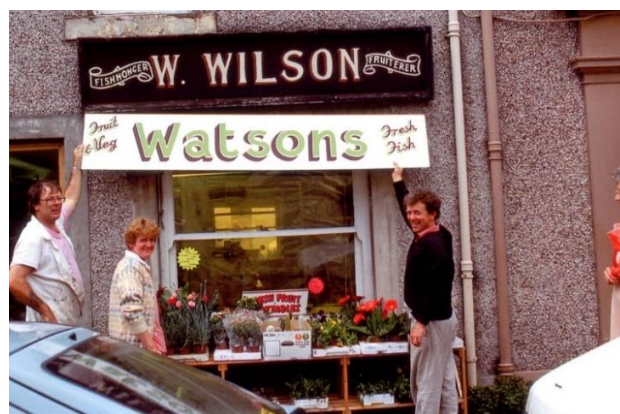
Sheila remembers it being hard work but very enjoyable making folk happy.

Initially Lizzie Wilson drove the van around the area but later Willie taught Sheila to drive. Sadly

Willie did not have good health, so having an extra driver was a big help.

The Wilsons delivered to all the local hotels – Cally Palace, Murray Arms, Anwoth and Angel.

		 Sea trout
haddock	plaice	
		
salmon	tomato chip basket	banana box



1990 : Watson's take over from Wilson's