

FORMER WOOLWORTH'S STORE

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FORMER WOOLWORTH'S STORE

33-34 High Street (Market Place), Dudley



Dudley Market Place c1955 (Copyright the Francis Frith Collection)

Built in 1935 in an Art Deco style, this building replaced the smaller 1914 store a few doors away which had become “famous for its queues” and had no room for an extension. The design provided an eye-catching frontage associating the shopping experience with entertainment (eg cinema) and popular fashion.

From 1960 onwards the ground floor shopfront was updated several times and the basement was converted into retail space in 1964. The store closed in 2008 and is now the Plaza Mall. During early 2022 the upper frontage was restored and there are plans to start work on reinstating the original ground floor shopfront later in the year.

ARCHITECTURE

The Art Deco aesthetic was borrowed from ancient cultures such as the Egyptians and Aztecs, as well as the Classical past and more recent art movements such as Cubism. The building's designer, Woolworth's Chief Architect Bruce Campbell Donaldson, chose it as Woolworth's in-house style for the 1930s builds. Although each 1930s store was slightly different there were many that looked similar to Dudley's.

Built in a vertical style, the shaped roofline is outlined against the sky. Emphasising its strong verticality are the tall, narrow glazing units. To further emphasise this the horizontality of intervening floor levels is suppressed by dark infill panels to match the dark glazing units. Unlike smaller Woolworth's stores Dudley's tall frontage could be elaborated with the projecting, tower-like end bays on either side.

The central windows are sandwiched between four vertical, projecting, ring-topped piers (large supports) which rise above the heads of the upper windows. The three horizontal rectangular panels, forming an entablature between the tops of the piers, are decorated by a narrow band of guilloche with interlaced circles below a broad frieze, S-shaped in profile, and decorated with vertical fluting.

Right: Detail of restored façade, showing decorated piers and chocolate-coloured panels.



Cover: Image of 1935 frontage (courtesy of Historic England Archives)

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER



Tiled façade

The upper frontage is clad in mainly cream faience* tiles made by Shaws Glazed Brick Co Ltd of Darwen, Lancashire. The two end dark infill panels of chocolate-coloured faience have a decorative diamond, scallop and ringed mini-column design, the other chocolate-coloured ones being plainer.

Detail of restored façade, showing one of the two end dark infill panels.

*Faience originated in Italy in the 1400s and is a glazed terracotta or brick sometimes referred to as 'architectural ceramics'. It offered a modular, varied and relatively inexpensive approach to wall and floor construction and was very adaptable to vigorous and rich ornamental detailing. Variations in the colour and pattern of the glaze could make it look like granite or limestone, which helped make it attractive for architects.

Windows

Visually, the darkness of the metal glazing units contrasts with the pale, stone-coloured surrounds.

Fascia (sign)

During the 2022 restoration the 1960 granite fascia was revealed, where a faint outline of the former Woolworth's lettering can still be seen. Text relating to the 1960 store update records the fascia as being of "Merlin Grey granite" and measuring "39'3" x 3'0" (12m x 1m). The lettering, produced by Pearce Signs, was "block type regency" with "red Perspex fronts" and "sides of gold bronze", and was "neon-illuminated".



Ghost lettering from the former Woolworth's sign can be seen on the granite fascia revealed through the 2022 restoration.

The fascia's 1935 surround has been retained or reinstated where lost. The moulded consoles (brackets) that book-end the fascia have an inward-curving scroll at the top and an outward-curving scroll at the bottom.

2022 restoration

In early 2022 the original faience tiles were revealed, repaired and restored, and the windows reinstated to their historic form by replacing the frames with metal, dark brown powder coated ones, restoring the upper frontage of the building back to how it appeared in the early-mid 20th century.

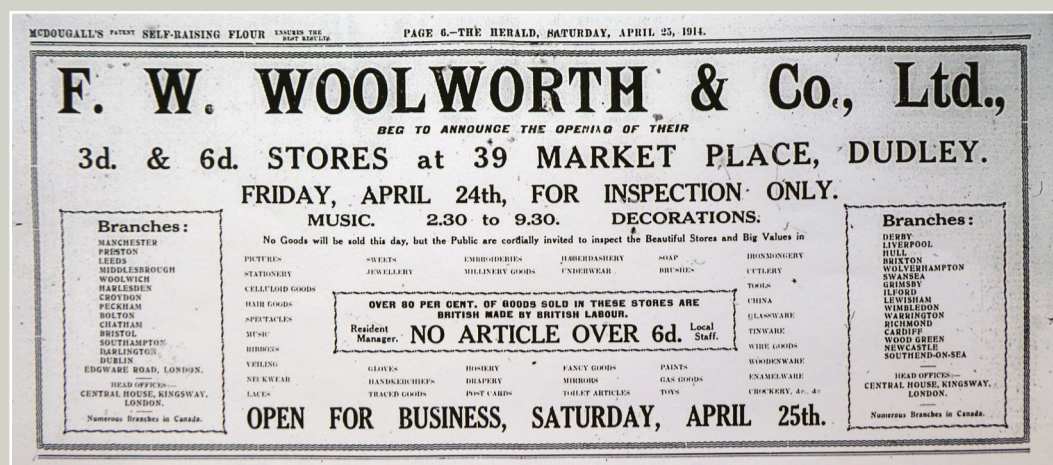
This work has added to the market place appearance, building on other town centre improvements including the restoration of the Grade II* listed drinking fountain immediately opposite.

The restoration was funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and through the Dudley Townscape Heritage Programme which provides grant assistance to historic buildings centred around the market place and neighbouring streets.

Image from January 2022, showing restored façade.



THE STORE THROUGH THE DECADES



Above: Advert announcing opening of first store of 1914.

Left: First store 1914-1935 (courtesy of Historic England Archive)

Woolworth's first Dudley store, No.32, opened in 1914 and by then the Woolworth's name had already been abbreviated by staff and customers to 'Woolies'. As this store at 38/39 Market Place was so popular and could not be extended, new premises had to be built.

Building collapse

Even before the footings had gone in, the site of the forthcoming new store made the news. Blocksidge's 1935 Dudley Almanack reported that just before business hours on the morning of 23 August 1934 the existing three storeyed building, about to be demolished, suddenly collapsed. The collapse appears to have been caused by excavation works next door (a re-build of the Peacocks store, then re-built again as Littlewoods, more recently was Poundland). Hundreds of tons of debris fell into the excavations and the Market Place, blocking the road for many hours. Amazingly no-one was injured: the Peacocks' workmen had just left, the staff who worked in the collapsed building were due only five minutes after the collapse, and the Midland Red bus had just seconds before picked up passengers from outside the building. Blocksidge also reports that had the collapse happened at almost any other time, and particularly on a Saturday night when the Market Place was crowded, a tragedy would have resulted.

Opening

Although the opening of the store on 12 April 1935 has been described as 'grand' unfortunately no newspaper coverage of the opening has been found.

'Nothing over 6d'

The new store continued the Woolworth's 'everything 3d or 6d' business model (until the Second World War), imported from its American owner's 'nickel-and-dime' format. It is the precursor of today's 'pound' and '99p' variety chains, of the self-service/browsing model, and of 'pick 'n' mix' (a Woolworth's invention). As it had done since the first stores opened in the UK in 1909, the company again reassured its shareholders and customers that over 90% of the goods it sold were British made.

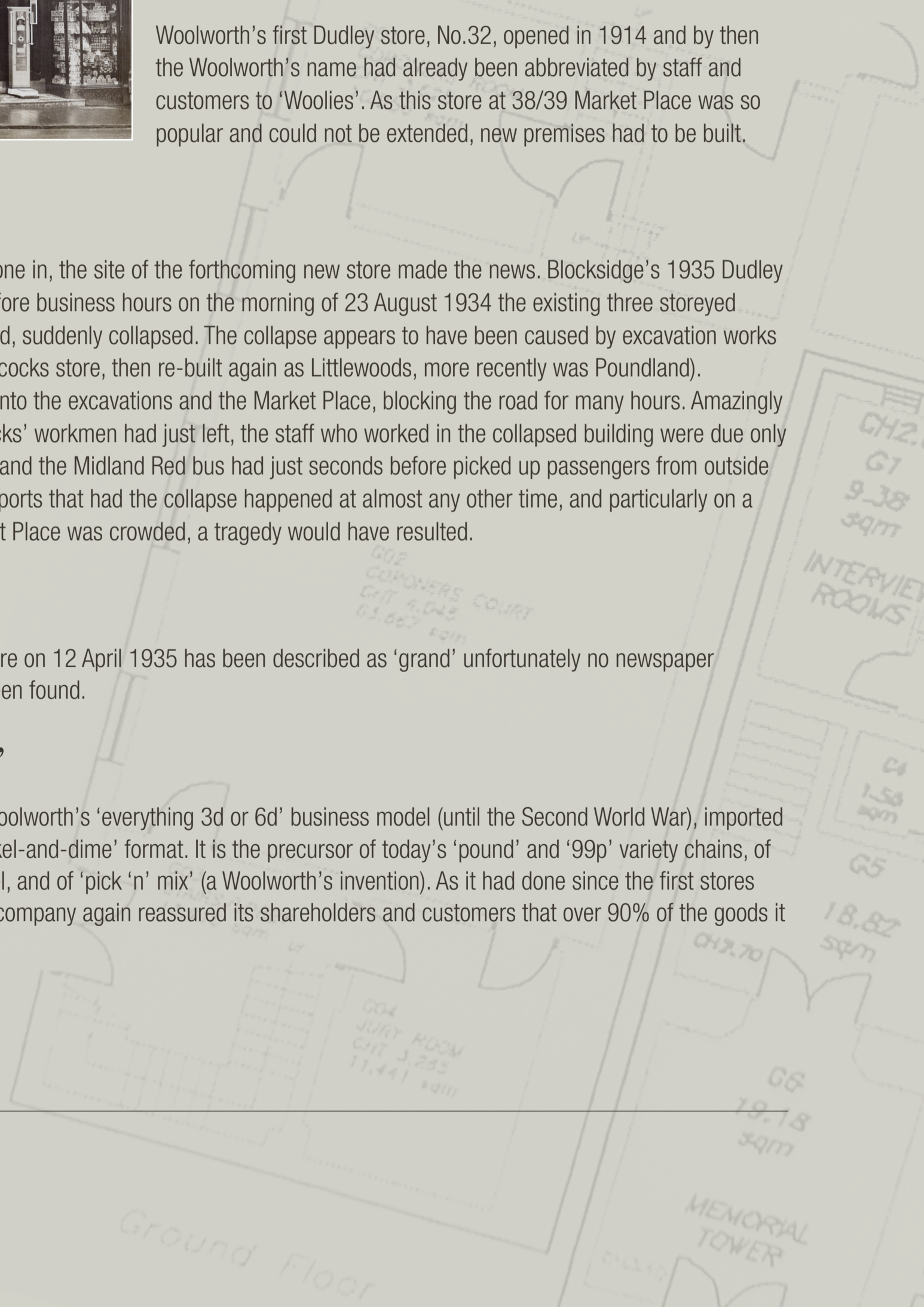




Image of Woolworth's built 1935 (courtesy of Historic England Archive)



Image of Woolworth's in 1960 (by Mr & Mrs Sidney Darby & Son Ltd, courtesy of Historic England Archive)

Weighing machine

As at Woolworth's American stores, the 1914 and 1935 store photos show that both had a penny-in-the-slot weighing machine positioned just inside the entrance, which would have been moved into one of the lobbies outside opening hours. Before bathroom scales were commonplace, these machines were money-spinners.

Window pelmets

The 1935 photo also shows that the shopfront utilised a pelmet across the top of the display windows: because the arc lamps that had illuminated shopfronts after dark were gradually replaced by internal lighting positioned directly above the window display, something was needed to conceal the light fittings and suppress glare. From around 1922 until the 1940s fringed, floral-patterned pelmet cloths were hung from rods in the upper part of display windows. However the 1960 photo (see below) indicates a different system was being used; the text relating to the 1960 store update again helpfully records that Italian SAIVO glass mosaic had been used, which could be the opaque top panels of the display windows we see in that photo.

Employment

In the mid-1930s Woolworth's employed about 25,000 people, many more than its competitors Littlewoods, Marks & Spencer and British Home Stores. In 1939 a company pension scheme was introduced and by 1964 holiday pay, sickness benefit, a Christmas bonus, a long service award and a cash wedding present for female staff were provided.

Generations of girls in particular were provided with experience of the workplace although there are records indicating that staff weren't always paid the going rate.

WW2

As occurred during WW1, a significant number of male staff members served in WW2. To help staff the stores, pensioners came out of retirement and more women were employed, some being promoted on a temporary basis. Many Woolworth's stores were requisitioned or part-requisitioned for the war effort; for several months in 1943, leading up to the D-Day landings, the top-floor stockroom of the Dudley store accommodated American airmen.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

CH2
G7
9.38
sqm
INTERVIEW ROOMS

G5
18.82
sqm

G6
19.18
sqm

In the late 1960s the author's older sister had a Saturday job, aged 15, at the Bilston store.

She worked 9am-5pm with a 30 minute lunch break, earning 16/8 (about £15 now).

She worked on the cooked meats and cheese counter. Her first job of the day was to check the yoghurts - as there were no 'use by' dates back then, if the pots were bulging then she had to throw them away. She recalls using cheese wire to cut cheese to the size requested by the customers, but she was not allowed to use the meat slicer.

Her uniform was a very old, very pale green overall which she had to thread the belt through, like a wrap-around dress. She had to wash her own uniform at home, and when Dad picked her up from work still wearing it, he always complained that she smelt of cheese!

On the first floor there was a staff canteen that she was directed to for her lunch. However for about six weeks she didn't realise that she had to pay! She recalls that taking her own lunch wasn't accepted and was a bit disgruntled that she had to spend some of her minimal earnings in the canteen.

After about a year she found another Saturday job at shoe retailer Freeman Hardy Willis, paying £1 a day (about £18.50 now). Woolworth's offered her a pay rise to stay which she declined.



Image showing Woolworth's in Dudley Market Place in 1950s (source: Woolworthsmuseum.co.uk)

Birmingham District Office

In 1941 the Birmingham District Office moved from the upper floors of the Walsall store to Dudley. In the 1972 Store List its address was 47/49 King St (now Trafalgar House), but by 1995 it had moved elsewhere.

Zebra crossing

Dudley's first zebra crossing was installed outside Woolworth's in 1949. A pedestrian crossing or bus stop right outside Woolworth's front door was a common feature: it is reported that, due to the value of a Woolworth's store to a town centre, if these did not already exist they were readily introduced by eager local authorities.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

CH2
G7
9.38
sqm
INTERVIEW ROOMS

G5
18.82
sqm

G6
19.18
sqm

G03
STAIRS/LOBBY
13.916 sqm

G04
11.441 sqm

1964 extension

Following the 1960 update to the external ground floor shopfront, plans were immediately made to create a basement sales floor. This opened on 4 June 1964, Dudley Woolworth's golden jubilee year, and fronted onto King Street at the rear of the store, enlarging the existing rear entrance. The Dudley Herald included a four-page spread in its 30 May edition informing us that:

The store boasted the first escalators in any store in Dudley, leading down to the new basement which opened up as a food hall (previously stock rooms). It included modern refrigerated counters and larger cheese, deli and cooked meats sections. The first floor accommodated modern, hygienic, butchers and deli preparing rooms. The second floor was stock rooms serviced by an extension to the lift. The total scheme extended the retail area by 4360 square feet.

Although the 'Nothing over 6d' tag had already gone prices 'are still extremely low', the paper said. The store advertised 'a much greater variety of top-value goods in all departments' and appears to have employed a lot of staff as a result.

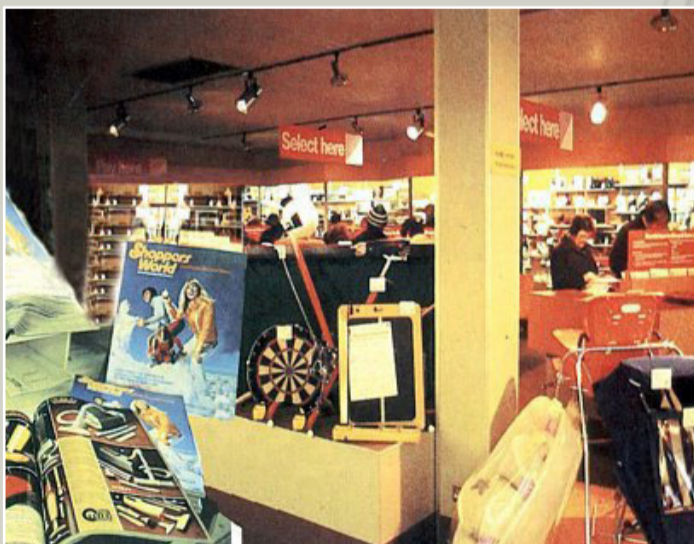
It had at least four managers: Manager Mr R. Brooks; Assistant Manager Mr N. Chadwick; Deputy Manager Mr P. Hope; and Stock Room Manager Mr L. Walker, all long-serving employees.

Several very long-serving female staff had originally started as Saturday Girls, including: Staff Supervisor Miss E. Marsh, who supervised between 300 and 400 full- and part-time staff at the store, depending on the season; Supervisor of Fruit & Sweets Miss E. Brooks; Window-dresser Mrs A. Lees; Stock-room Supervisor Mrs V. Lawrence; Head Cashier Miss H. Jones; Cashier & Freight Office Clerk Miss E. Sewell; Soft Goods Merchandise Supervisor Miss M. Jewkes; Jewellery, Ice-cream & Haberdashery Merchandise Supervisor Miss G. Jones; Horticultural Dept. Supervisor Mrs M. Humphrey; Deli Charge-hand Mrs P. Miles; Household Dept. Supervisor Miss I. Nock; and staff canteen Cook Miss C. Hadley (described as 'buxom and jolly') who helped prepare about 150 three-course staff lunches every day.

A 12 December 1964 Dudley Herald article covered a seemingly annual late night Christmas opening for disabled/care home residents etc. The staff were working as unpaid volunteers.

Refreshments

Following its American model it was Woolworth's that introduced customer cafeterias and lunch bars into British towns, which pre-1920 were usually simple tea bars often with no tables or chairs. Although the first store in Dudley had a tea bar which the above mentioned Mrs Humphrey worked in for eight years, no records or local recollection has been found of a customer restaurant since.



Shoppers World

It seems the basement food hall was relatively short-lived, or maybe shrunk, as it is documented that from 1975-83 the basement was a Shoppers World (a catalogue store, Woolworth's equivalent of Argos).

Image showing Shoppers World (source: Woolworthsmuseum.co.uk)

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

Closure

The store closed on 27 December 2008. The company had gone into administration and as no buyer was found all 800 stores had closed by 6 January 2009, just six months short of the firm's centenary. About 27000 people lost their jobs. Its demise was initially met with disbelief, followed by nostalgia; there had been a Woolworth's in virtually every town and even now every adult still seems to have a happy memory of it.

Julie A Clarke, Dudley Heritage Volunteer

June 2022.

Acknowledgments:

Historic England Archives, Swindon.

Dudley Archive & Local History Centre.

<http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk>

<https://wooliesbuildings.wordpress.com>

'Woolworth's – 100 Years on the High Street' by Kathryn A Morrison (*Historic England*).

'Dudley: the twentieth century' by Atkins, Matthews & Robins.

Blocksidge's 1935 Dudley Almanack.

Wikipedia.

