

Mr Chedzoy's Oil Boy

David Gibbs

(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)

Like all the best people, I got my first job through family connections. My brother Jack held the post before me, but he was moving on to better things - delivering bread by carrier bike, I think it was. So I stepped in to fill the breach. And that's how I came to be Mr Chedzoy's oil boy.

Mr Chedzoy came from Martock. His business was that of mobile ironmonger-cum-oil-merchant and, back in the war years, he had rounds on different days in several South Somerset villages. He came to Merriott on Saturdays.

At that time, many houses were still without electricity and there was no gas supply to the village. In housing without electricity, lighting was by oil lamp or candles and cooking was done on an open fire in the winter months with a switch to oil stoves in the summer. Oil stoves were also used for heating. So summer or winter, oil - or paraffin, to be more precise - was an essential commodity. Many a village housewife was heavily dependent on Mr Chedzoy. Indeed, his business was not just commercial; it was also an essential public service.

I think it was the opportunity to ride in Mr Chedzoy's van that had a lot to do with me following in my brother's footsteps. It was rather like a showman's vehicle of the sort that used to come to nearby Crewkerne Fair before and immediately after the war. It was very colourful, perhaps a little gaudy even, and full of character. To a small boy it was truly magnificent and I remember it with great affection.

The van was first registered in 1927. It had a green bonnet fronted by an exposed radiator with the Thorneycroft logo incorporated in the cast header tank, itself a source of heat for warming frozen hands on cold winter days.

Across the front of the radiator, there was a bar on which the headlights were mounted. The sidelights were fixed to the large red mudguards that shrouded the solid-tired wheels. Low down there was a projecting starting handle that no mere boy could turn and often sapped a man's



The old Thorneycroft

strength before the engine would burst into life.

On a board immediately above the wide, square windscreen an arc of gold lettering proudly proclaimed A E CHEDZOY AND CO LTD, and beneath that HARDWARE, OIL AND GENERAL MERCHANTS, and beneath that again TRACTOR AND LUBRICATING OILS. Immediately below the windscreen were the words EVERYTHING FOR THE HOME.

Projecting just below the windscreen there was a horn with a coiled trumpet and a large black rubber bulb that I was forbidden to squeeze. What a tantalising temptation that horn was!

Originally, the van had half-size doors with mica upper panels that contained a flap through which the driver stuck his arm to make hand signals, but these had been replaced with full-size doors that had sliding glass windows. On the lower half of the doors, more gold lettering advertised rugs, lino, felt, galvanised wire and the like.

You clambered on to a running board to get into the cab. In there, three men and a boy could sit side by side on the bench seat. A tall ebony-knobbed gear lever and an equally tall handbrake rose vertically from the wooden floor. The foot pedals were each as big as the sole of a boy's shoe. And on the floor on the passenger side, there was usually an ankle-deep pile of rabbit skins, some of which were invariably maggoty, collected by Mr Chedzoy at four pence a time as part of the war effort. What eventually happened to them, I wonder? Made into fur coats?

On the outside of the cab just behind the nearside door was a vertical ladder that gave access to the upper floor of the van. There was a tank up there that held thirty-five gallons of paraffin, and surrounding it numerous five-gallon, square cans containing a reserve supply. When the tank became empty, the contents of the cans were used to fill it up again.

Somewhere deep inside the body of the vehicle there was another large tank which, when full, contained well over a hundred gallons of paraffin and that, too, would be empty before the day was out.

You couldn't see this second tank because it was surrounded by terraced racks, which were edged with little wooden spindle fences, and in these racks, cushioned from vibration by a bed of packing straw, was stored other household merchandise such as furniture polish, Brasso, string, cups and saucers, plates, scrubbing brushes, Vim, pudding basins, cake tins, fly papers, baking dishes, candles, lamp wicks of assorted sizes - everything except Kilner preserving jars and the black lead used for blacking fire grates. These two items were very hard to come by during the war years and when available were not displayed but kept hidden away under the counter, which in this case was under the hinged cab seat. Only the best customers got their hands on these, although a spot of bartering - half a dozen eggs, say, or a pound of sugar, which were also hard to come by - might induce Mr Chedzoy to respond favourably.

At the rear end of the vehicle, tied to the vertical pillars that supported the upper deck, were the larger items - galvanised bathtubs, gardening tools, brooms, mops, rolls of coconut matting. Occasionally there was a roll or two of lino, which was another

scarce commodity, and along the sides of the vehicle hung pots and pans and bowls and buckets that jingled and jangled in a cacophony of sound as the van trundled around the village.

The prices, I remember, were often trimmed to just under the next shilling. Everything seemed to be 1/11, 2/11, 3/11, and so on, with 19/11 being about the maximum.

All the merchandise was, of course, exposed to the elements. So at the first hint of rain, with no time to waste, a large green tarpaulin was hastily pulled into position and tied down; but immediately it stopped raining Mr Chedzoy lost no time in pulling it back again, for it was essential that the customers could see the goods.

The weather, however, had little effect on the business of delivering oil. Even if it was blowing a gale this activity went on uninterrupted, with the focal point being about midway along on the near side of the van. Here there was a wooden recess in which there were two brass taps. It was from these that the paraffin was drawn off into the gallon and half-gallon measures kept hanging alongside. Then it was tipped into a tunicar - a funnel, but we always referred to it as a tunicar - and so into the customers' cans.

As oil boy, my job was to fetch the cans from the doorsteps, take them to the van, fill them with the required amount of paraffin, take the can back to the householder, collect the money and then take the money back to Mr Chedzoy. He kept the takings in a leather moneybag which he wore slung diagonally across his back. I can see him now - a small man, trilby hat, polished leather gaiters - tilting the bag to near horizontal and shaking the coins as he looked for elusive change.

A price that is fixed in my mind was one shilling and four pence for a gallon, about 7p in today's money. Sometimes the money would be already waiting for me on the doorstep, hidden beneath the can. Some customers would give me a tip - a penny perhaps, sometimes two, sometimes a flat-sided three penny bit or a little silver 'Joey'. Occasionally I'd get a jam tart or a bun, but I preferred money for I never did much care for the paraffin flavour that all foodstuffs acquired the minute my Saturday hands touched them.

The containers a household used gave some indication of the wealth of the family. The better off had purpose-built cans, usually round and with smart little screw-capped pouring spouts. Those not so well off had any old can they had managed to get their hands on. The poorest families often didn't have a can at all and made do with a miscellaneous collection of bottles.

Filling a standard-size can was relatively easy. All that was involved was to fill the measure and pour the paraffin into the tunicar as fast as it would run into the can. Filling the odd-size cans and the bottles was more difficult. You had to be sure that all the paraffin in the tunicar would eventually pass through into the container without spillage. A crisis could be averted by a last-minute withdrawal of the tunicar back into the measure, but you had to be sharp. Often it would be too late, and then there would be paraffin all over the road. You just hoped it didn't happen outside Mrs Farr's house because she took a great pride in the state of her bit of road. To make it worse she

lived on Shiremoor Hill and if paraffin was spilt it ran down the hill so that a third of a pint looked like major pollution.

'Look there's a mess you've bin an' made again, Mr Chedzee. Can't you git thic boy to be more careful?' she would grumble.

'Don't you worry Missus,' Mr Chedzoy would amiably reply, used to dealing with such instances, *'the rain'll soon wash that away.'*

But of course, the rain didn't wash the oil away. In fact, you could trace the progress of Mr Chedzoy's van around the village by the stains on the road. He always stopped in exactly the same spots, week after week. The old mare that pulled the baker's van around the village at that time knew exactly where she had to stop and needed no telling. I think Mr Chedzoy's van was a bit like that.

Not all the spilt paraffin went on the road though. A fair amount of it ended up on my socks and trousers. My shoes were permanently dull. I must have stunk of paraffin and been something of a walking fire risk. And all for four shillings (20p) a day, summer and winter, come rain or shine. Plus tips of course.



Mr Chedzoy had a second van on the road at the time that served other villages, a much more modern Bedford, painted red. In my view, this was no match for the charm of the old Thorneycroft!



My mother's lamp

The other day, just for old time's sake, I got out the old paraffin lamp that was the main source of light in the cottage where I grew up. It's a lovely old lamp, rather grand in fact. It found its way into our home when it was discarded by the occupiers of one of the bigger houses in the village when they were connected to the electricity supply. I filled it with paraffin that I bought from a machine at my local garage. I put a match to the wick, waited for the chimney to warm a little, and then gently turned the wick up, just like I'd seen my mother do hundreds of times. But I shouldn't have. The light was abysmal and the smell was awful and hung about the house long after the lamp was extinguished. I'll tell you something, Mr Chedzoy's Alladin, White May and Royal Daylight paraffin burnt much brighter, and there was never any smell - well, not that I can remember.

Not long after the above article appeared in *The Visitor*, in 1989, I was delighted to receive the following letter from one of Mr Chedzoy's daughters.

Torquay
February 1991

Dear Mr Gibbs,

Referring to your interesting and delightful article about my father in The Visitor, February issue.

I probably knew you because I very often helped him out on Saturdays and indeed on many other days and routes. I learnt to drive on the Thorneycroft and would drive it for him between his various stops. I obtained my licence in those early days enabling me to hold a licence covering all grades including, I presume, a tank. I still hold such a licence and the grades have never been altered up to and including my new licence issued this January. I always had a fondness for the Thorneycroft and I would often help him 'load it up,' as he would say.

My father was very fond of Merriott and more so its people. He made many friends there and long after his retirement he talked with great fondness of the folk in Merriott. When I visited Martock, I would often drive him around his favourite haunts, Merriott etc. He outlived so many of the inhabitants and this made him sad.

It was lovely to relive those times through your article. I've met dozens of people who, when they know who I am, say, often with affection, 'Of course I knew your father when'

I was always very proud of how he stuck to his job through thick and thin, and some times were thin! He was very conscientious and amiable and remained like that to the fast, he never hated a soul. You have made me very nostalgic for those far off days. They may not have been all that good, but in my book were very worthwhile.

Many thanks for your amusing and true comments. I do miss very much my father's retelling of the many amusing happenings he encountered on his rounds.

I shall value your article very much and I'm so glad you remember him in such a way.

Yours sincerely,

Miss Mona Chedzoy.

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