

## The Cobbler and his Shop – By Howard Robinson

When I first came to Beaufort at the head of the Ebbw Valley in 1968-69 there were still many shops along the Rise area, but year upon year many were closing; unfair competition posed by the coming of the ‘Supermarket’ was just too much for some of them, they could not compete with the massive bulk buying.

In 1973 a cobblers shop ‘H. Smith and son Boot maker and shoe repairer’, situated a third of the way up Beaufort Rise stood empty, ready to be further demolished.

It was in a sorry state, the back wall and the roof had been pushed in on top of all the machinery, which remained ‘in situ’. The sowing machines the ‘lasts’ the work benches were all covered with slates, stones and mortar. I took a risk when I entered, but that is what I did. Brass sprigs and steel sprigs were every where in the chaos of the interior. Hanging skewiff on one wall was the price list from 1947.

**WALES & MON. BOOT TRADES FEDERATION**  
GWENT BRANCH

### PRICE LIST

Government Order.      May 3rd, 1947

Gents.		Boys, 7 to 8	
Rubber	Leather	Rubber	Leather
Soled and Heeled	8 0 9/2	Soled and Heeled	4 0 1/2
Heeled	2 2 2/2	Soled	3 2 3/2
Soled	5 9 7/0	Heeled	1 6 1/2
Soling, Heeling, and Hobs		<b>Ladies</b>	
	8 8 1/0	Soled and Heeled	5 0 6/0
Long Soles, extra	2 6 3/0	Soled	4 0 4/2
Toe Caps, per pr.	2 10 1/2	Heeled	1 6 1/2
Tips, per pr.	1 0 1/2	Long Soles, extra	1 3 2/2
Tips with Fillers	2 2 2/2	<b>Girls, 11 to 1</b>	
Heels and Tips	2 2 2/2	Soled and Heeled	4 7 5/2
Nailed only	1 6 1/2	Soled	3 8 1/2
<b>Youths, 4 to 5</b>		Heeled	1 6 1/2
Soled and Heeled	6 10 8/2	<b>Girls, 9 to 10</b>	
Soled	5 0 6/2	Soled and Heeled	4 3 5/3
Heeled	2 2 2/2	Soled	3 2 5/2
<b>Youths, 2 to 3</b>		Heeled	1 6 1/2
Soled and Heeled	6 0 7/2	<b>Girls, 7 to 8</b>	
Soled	4 8 5/2	Soled and Heeled	3 8 1/2
Heeled	1 10 2/2	Soled	2 10 5/6
<b>Boys, 11 to 1</b>		Heeled	1 6 1/2
Soled and Heeled	5 0 6/2	<b>Children's</b>	
Soled	4 0 1/2	4 to 6	
Heeled	1 10 2/2	Soled and Heeled	2 10 3/2
*Rubbers or Iron Tips on all above 9d. per pair, extra.		Soled	1 10 2/2
<b>Boys, 9 to 10</b>		Heeled	1 3 1/2
Soled and Heeled	4 7 5/2	*Soled Lays & Toe Lays Heel Price (Min.)	
Soled	3 8 4/2	1. Boys and Girls -	
Heeled	1 6 1/2	Iron or Rubber 6d. extra.	
		Toe Caps 1 6 per pair.	

All Stitching 1d. per inch, extra.

Edgar Powell & Sons, Printers, Traders

May 1947 Government order. Gwent Branch Price list. Wales and Mon Boot Trades Federation.

From a windowsill, I salvaged a cast iron nail tray; it had blackplate \*inserts, along with quantities of the working materials used by a craftsman cobbler.

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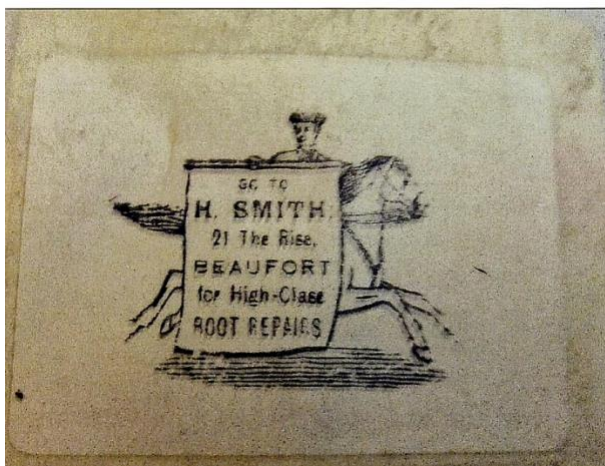
H. Smith and Son 21 Beaufort Rise



Shop and cottages, The Rise  
March 1973

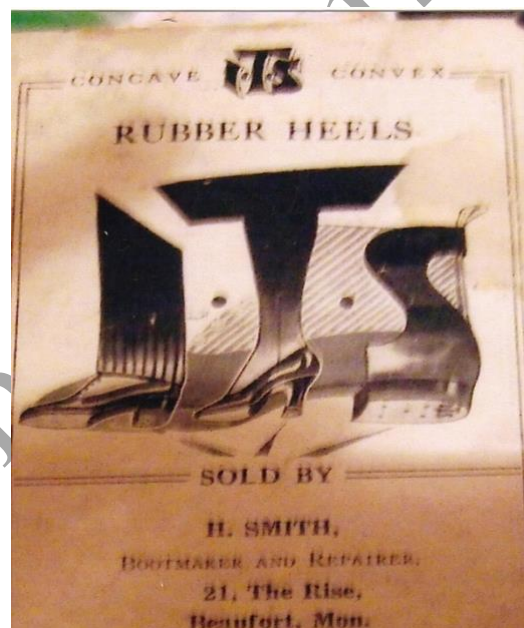
Below one of the work benches tucked away was a black glass bottle, fluted, unusual. Stamped J.Paterson Glasgow it had a weld at the neck so it could easily be from the 1890's. From the debris on the floor, I picked up a rubber stamp it was personalised.





The Stamp, 21 The Rise Beaufort.

Rubber heels sold by H. Smith, Boot maker and repairer Beaufort Mon.



I was mindful of the dangers of possible falling masonry as I picked up a leaflet from the jumble every where.

I climbed outside stepped on to the forcourted paving slabs in front of the shop, walked a little way and took photographs from various vantage points.

The shop was in a row of sturdily built stone cottages. It bore all the hall marks of a purpose made Victorian shop front. A week later the buildings were cleared but not very well, stones mud and rubble remained and people began to complain about it. In 1987 a small car park was made out of the area.

It remains to this day.



It seems that very other person in the twenty first century wears trainers.

Trainers made of leather or man made fibre, cheap trainers costing a few pounds, or designer branded goods costing a great deal more. They are worn and eventually thrown away. But it has to be said they provide excellent value as foot ware for male, female, or children.

It was not always like that.

Fifty years ago, shoes wore out regularly and were expensive to buy. Trainers did not exist as such, there were plimsolls or to use the colloquial term rubber daps but they smelled and were not waterproof.

The materials used in the manufacture of shoes were limited, it was nearly always leather. The sole and heel were usually the same, unless the shoes (sole and heel) were of rubber, which for a long period, seemed to be the only alternative.

Plastic and nylon the so-called man-made fibres, had yet to be invented as foot ware. Although rubber was superior for the heels, it was of little use for anything else except Wellington boots or the like, because rubber smelled of rubber and did not let the feet breathe, mixed with body sweat, the result often stank.

As far as the leather shoe was concerned, the biggest problem was water ingress. Leather, unless waxed, is not waterproof; this usually happened along a seam, resulting in wet feet. So, a good pair of leather shoes was precious to most people, in the 1950's, and they were looked after with wax polish and buffed to a nice shine. Provided they were well made, some of them hand stitched with waxed thread, this was proof against most things, they could last for years. To prolong the life of the heel many people bought small flat metal studs and hammered them in.

It may come as a surprise to any under 35 years old that in the towns and villages, up and down the country not so long ago, equally valued with the iron monger and the greengrocer, was the cobbler.

It was to him that you went if your shoes needed mending or your belt wanted a buckle or various other tasks stiletto heels included, that were to do with, what was termed 'leather goods.'

It is not for nothing that someone who is down on their luck is often referred to as 'down at heel'.

My Father, who passed away thirteen years ago, could remember in the 1920's, children who were not sent to school because they had no shoes to wear. In the decade just after the Second World War, a good stout pair of shoes still meant a lot, not only to the older person but to the young and the middle aged as well.

To get your shoes soled and heeled was not cheap. After all, the man was a craftsman, and they have never come cheap!

There was an alternative, "Do it yourself".

Ironmongers had, to my knowledge, sold shoe leather for decades, almost every town and village had an Ironmonger.

In the late 1950's with the advent of catalogue shopping, (my Auntie Maud had such), a person could buy any number of things, curtains clothes, you name it, it was there in the catalogue, and could be paid for weekly, for a small sum in direct relation to the cost of the article. The thick home shopping catalogue sold a Home Cobbler's Kit!

My father surveyed the assortment of goods hanging up in front of the ironmongers.

Baths bowls buckets, all made of galvanized steel or enamel. Right at the top of the display, hanging by a hook, was an assortment of shoe leather.

He sized them up with his eyes; the large piece and the smaller one should be enough for a pair of shoes

The cobbler's kit consisted of a cobbler's hammer, a special knife for cutting leather, and a cast iron shoe 'last' there was also a black or brown conglomerate wax crayon, to colour the rough buff edge of the leather once it had been shaped and hammered on to the shoe.

So, the shoe with the old sole attached, was fitted on to the last, the leather offered up and cut into an approximate shape. Once satisfied that the leather covered the whole area and was as accurately placed, the leather was hammered on with sprigs (small nails) onto the existing sole, adding a new layer.

Sometimes the old sole could be taken off and a new one added.

The heel was a much simpler matter and was often removed and a new one nailed on, often with the addition of the aforementioned metal studs to give added wear.

Dad was not a craftsman, and it showed; very often, even though care had been taken, there would be what was termed 'a nail up'. That is, one of the sprigs would stick into the sole of your foot and it was not easy to find out which one it was among the dozen hammered into the bottom of the shoe.

So it was off with the shoe, fit it on to the last, hammer the sole flat in an attempt to blind off the point of the offending sprig or nail, and then try the shoe again. "No, it wasn't that one Dad, It must be the one down near the toe."

It was a case of trial and error, until; at last, I could walk in comfort.

We both felt a sense of elation, him and me.

As the years passed by, new oil derived materials and adhesives were invented including a material that was called 'Neolite' which was pliable and hard wearing. Philips stick on soles had been one alternative even when I was a young person. Made of rubber or a rubber derivative, they would last for a time, but almost invariably they would come adrift, attacked by poor adhesion wet and wear.

Good rubber or leather took some beating in the old days. The good cobbler took some beating.

But like almost everything in this modern world, this situation could not last forever.

New materials, new fashions and technology, were found to be, perhaps not superior, but decidedly **different** in the new throw away society that seemed to come with the passing of those years.

Attitudes changed with the technology. What was Hi- Tec today- was old hat tomorrow.

Thank human nature that many people still utilize and value some of the old ways.

There are still some cobbler's shops about, and people to use them. But many others embraced the new ways and who is to say that way is wrong!

I am just glad that I managed to experience some of the old-fashioned ways that made up the fabric of life in the years gone by.

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1,500w

\* Black plate is raw uncovered mild steel.