

The rise and fall of Earlsdon Street?



Earlsdon Street in the early 1920s from a postcard courtesy of David Fry

Recent editions of ECHO have reported on a dizzying number of changes to Earlsdon Street retail offerings. Forget it if you want to go to a bank, a butcher, a greengrocer or a fishmonger, let alone a gent's outfitter. And where now to get your morning coffee? There are so many cafés to choose from. There was a time when shoppers would come to Earlsdon Street to satisfy all their shopping needs but not so now.

The Earlsdon Research Group are using census and street directory material to plot the changes in Earlsdon's original eight streets in the last 150 years. Our web site (earlsdonresearchgroup.org) already has reports on Berkeley Road South, Providence Street, Moor Street and Arden Street. Clarendon Street and Warwick Street will follow later.

Earlsdon Street has experienced so many changes that it deserves special treatment to explore its origins, with radical changes in the 20th century and a subsequent shift from a shopping centre to a street with a developed café and restaurant culture in recent years.

From the earliest years after 1852 Earlsdon Street has always been different. It had three pubs, with the City Arms founded in 1853, the Royal Oak opening in 1859 and The Cottage close by in Warwick Street

established in 1865. The attempt to open a teetotal coffee tavern in 1889 was not a success but the later working men's club, the Albany, clearly was. Huge changes occurred in the 1890s when Earlsdon was incorporated into Coventry, the Albany Road opened traffic to the city, and the Newcombe estates massively increased the housing stock. These triggered the start of shopping in Earlsdon Street. Up until then nearly all the houses on the street had been lived in by craftsmen in the watch trade, each with their own particular skill, but in 1896 the Co-op opened its first shop and was so successful that within a few years it had founded a butcher's and a draper's store.

The first years of the 20th century up to 1914 marked the establishment of Earlsdon Street as the 'High Street' of Earlsdon. The newly established Newcombe estate contributed to the unprecedented boom in Coventry's population growing by 52 per cent between 1901 and 1911. The tram service arrived in 1905 and in 1911 the cinema, known as the Imperial, opened next to the City Arms. In 1907 there were 14 shops. One innovation was a 'fish and potato bar' and a greengrocer's shop was established in 24 Earlsdon Street (now the site of the restaurant Street). The owner was Joseph Moore. His nephew, also called Joseph, boarded with him and worked in the shop. In 1926 young Joseph took over the shop from his uncle and worked there until 1962, clocking up 54 years of service. The other shops were two butchers, a dress maker, a newsagent, a grocer, a hairdresser, a fishmonger, a fruiter and a confectioner.

Five years later, in 1912, there were 25 shops, one of which was the post office. In the following year the first bank branch, Lloyds, was opened. That year the *Coventry Graphic* noted in August the "astonishing growth and development of Coventry's delightful suburb, one of the most rapidly developed suburbs in Coventry".

In 1919 there were 33 shops, including now another bank, the Midland, and a dispensing chemist. By 1926 there were 50 shops and 56 by 1931. The interwar peak was reached in 1939 with 59 shops. By then there was the full gamut of retail outlets but not much by way of cafés and tea rooms. There were six butchers, five grocers, four fish shops, three chemists, three hairdressers, two bakers, two hardware shops, two dairies and everything else from a dry cleaner's to a shoe shop, from a tobacconist's to a milliner and a draper, as well as ladies and gents outfitters.

The Coventry Standard of August reflected on the subsequent success of Earlsdon shopping in 1958 with a banner headline "The Blitz Brought

Prosperity to Earlsdon", noting how shops in the city centre had been destroyed in the war and "city people started flocking to Earlsdon to do their shopping". This continued after the war. One trader noted that "since then it has come into its own as a shopping centre because parking is not so difficult here as in the city centre". Another remembered that when he started as a butcher the main street was lined on either side with rows of houses until they were gradually converted into shops. "Now there is only one house that has not been made into a shop".

There was no space left for new shops by 1970. By then there were 59 shops from the clock tower up to Arden Street. The Coventry Building Society had opened a branch and another bank had arrived. All the familiar trades were there but now there was also an estate agent and a supermarket, a wine merchant, a jeweller, and an optician. It was an impressively comprehensive shopping centre.

It was, of course, a quite different country back then. Retail parks had hardly begun, there was no internet shopping and there were fewer car owners. Far fewer people ate out and pubs rarely served food in those days. There was something comforting about the routine of the weekly shop along Earlsdon Street but it could not last for much longer.

Moving ahead 44 years we can look, in the pre-pandemic days, at Earlsdon Street in 2014 using Google Street View. We still had three banks and the Coventry Building Society (for the moment) but many familiar shops had disappeared. There was only one butcher left and drapers and fishmongers were not to be found. Men's outfitters had disappeared, although two shops selling ladies clothing still remained. The predominant retail sector had become catering: takeaways, fast food outlets and restaurants. There were eight cafés, five takeaway establishments and four restaurants. Some comforting sense of permanence came from the three pubs (if you include The Cottage in Warwick Street but with a back entrance onto Earlsdon Street) and the Albany club, and the Co-op supermarket, all of which had been around for over 125 years. These have provided anchor points in a rapidly changing retail environment.

In late November 2023 we conducted our own survey along either side of the street. A strong sense of change pervades the scene. Now all the banks have departed as have the building society and some of the classic high street shops, the butcher, greengrocer and fishmonger. In addition to seven empty shops, there are four estate agents, four fast food outlets, five cafés and seven restaurants, five hairdressers and two salons

devoted to health and beauty. Shopping has changed from buying goods to consuming services and products. These leisure industry shops can seem a bit ethereal and there has been a high turnover of cafés in the last decade. There are now also three charity shops. However, a sense of continuity can still be found with the two supermarkets and four small grocers. Continuity is also provided by a pharmacy and two opticians, a florist, a hardware store and a launderette. In addition, Earlsdon Street now boasts a bathroom furnisher, and seemingly the contemporary requirements of a mobile phone shop and a tattoo salon. And, of course, most constant of all, our three pubs, a thriving social club, and the Co-op.

It is hard to imagine what the next decade, let alone century, will bring but for as long as Earlsdon remains among the most desirable suburbs in Coventry optimism will outdo pessimism. It will be fascinating to see how Earlsdon Street continues to evolve.

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