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STORE CASH CARRIERS

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Many of us above a certain age can remember these often noisy, yet characterful, features of large, even medium-sized and occasionally quite small stores. They can still sometimes be seen today, mostly in museums, at the Co-op at Beamish, Dartford, Crich, Bromsgrove, Trowbridge and a few other places.

In 19th Century shops of any size it is customarily to have a single cashier (or cashiers) in a central office through which all payments and charge issue were routed. For the salesman (or perhaps a child assistant) to carry cash from the sales point to the central cashier was unacceptably time-consuming so attempts were made to mechanise these transactions. Primarily these emanated from the United States but systems appeared in Britain and other countries including Canada, South Africa, Australia, even China. Some systems have things in common with railways, others with pipelines; all count as “Materials Handling”.

Shopkeeper William Lamson of Lowell, Massachusetts, devised in 1872 a system using a hollowed-out wooden ball which split into two halves and in which the cash was put. The ball was then put on a track, which sloped down to the cashier, who, once he had dealt with the transaction, returned the receipt and change by another track sloping in the opposite direction. Lamson formed a company in Boston, which had installations in 600 American stores by 1885, the year this cash-ball system spread to London. The system was simple; its disadvantages were that a ball could fall off the track and damage displays and a high ceiling was essential to furnish the necessary gradients on a long “run”. Beamish Co-op uses this system.

Cable and wire systems afforded alternatives. The cable type, patented in 1882 and popular in America, was propelled by a continuous cable driven by a steam engine (later an electric motor). It was rare over here but the similar rapid wire system - in which the wire was fixed - was especially popular in Britain though it too was an American patent. Lamson took over the company, building wire systems in 1887 and marketed them in Britain from around 1894. In this system, the money and receipt were placed in a wooden cup (“carriage”) attached by a bayonet fitting to a brass trolley which hung from the wire by two pulleys and was propelled by a catapult device (Group member Graham Wild remembers this system at E Braggins & Sons Ltd, Drapers & Outfitters in Bedford in the 1940’s & 50’s). Carriages could travel round corners, even between floors. Rapid wire systems were still being publicised 1962; in 1974, about fifty still worked in Britain, presumably exclusive of those in museums. Several variants of the rapid wire systems were devised, maybe as attempts to bypass Lamson’s patents. Some of these appear to have been exclusively American; others, including those marketed by the Gipe Carrier

Company, from 1908, and the Dart Cas Carrier Company, based in Stoke-on-Trent and later bought out by Lamson, prospered over here. Some wire systems operated a cash basket which carried besides cash, purchases for wrapping centrally, but these were not, apparently, a feature of English practice.

Finally, there are the pneumatic tube systems in which the carrier is a hollow cylinder 5"-6" long sealed at each end into an opening in the side. Carriers are numbered to identify the sales point they belong to; the tubes are similarly numbered in the cash office. Two tubes are required between each sales point and the central office, one for each direction. They are less intrusive as the tubes can be "blocked out" and were probably faster in operation than ball or wire systems. They were introduced into American stores by John Wanamaker of Philadelphia from 1880 but had been used by post office and telegraph companies from the 1850's. Several firms got in on this act, including Lamson, who in 1899 built a factory near King's Cross (later moved to Willesden); others, like Sturtevant of London and Dart, mentioned earlier, who had links with the Co-operative movement, manufactured similar systems in Britain. The vacuum plant, or blower, was usually in the basement, powered by a steam engine, later on an electric motor.

Cash carriers figure in literature, notably in Kipps (H G Wells) and Under Milk Wood (Dylan Thomas), and in films such as Kind Hearts and Coronets (1949) and the The Magic Box (1951) but not, as far as I know, in music though there would be scope for this, especially in so-called "library" music.

The widespread use of cash registers and the rise of self-service worked against cash carriers and except in museums, they have largely disappeared, though some supermarkets use pneumatic tube systems[1, 2].

NOTES

1. For more information, see Andrew Buxton's well illustrated Cash Carriers in Shops (Shire, 2004) and the sources cited in its bibliography.
2. In my home town of Doncaster cash carriers survived well into the 1950's notably (though apparently not exclusively so) at Morris' wallpaper shop and the Co-op, both its central emporium and all branches.

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