

STORIES OF OLD WATFORD: The Legend that is PC Don McBride

McBride. A typical neighbourhood bobby and well-known figure in central Watford. Loved by most, feared by a few. He toured the streets on his large-framed push bike, which sported a pair of handcuffs chained to the frame. He was so much a part of the furniture that somehow wherever he was, his large navy-blue clad body stood out, yet blended in at the same time.

Don had an excellent record of arrest. He often intervened at the planning stage of crime to save the paperwork of having to deal with it later on. As well as keeping his ear to the ground with local shopkeepers, he also befriended a couple of petty criminals. It was a fair trade, a few bits of gossip for a packet of Number six or bottle of cider. Don had many friends who accepted his occasionally brash language, and chauvinistic attitudes.

McBride frequented the most popular haunts in town, particularly the second-hand quarters of Queen's Road. He spent many an hour chatting to the owners of Carrs 'antique' furniture. This shop was stacked from floor to ceiling with old wardrobes, tables, beds and dressers. It smelt of mothballs and tobacco smoke. There was the tiniest clear space near the window, just room for two battered dirty wing-backed chairs, and a monstrosity of a black and white television which modelled an aerial fashioned from a bent wire coat-hanger. The shop keepers sat on these chairs watching horse racing every afternoon; woe betide any customer who dared to interrupt their viewing.

After his daily catch up, Don would cut across to the music shop opposite. He rarely used the front door (unless on official business) but went straight down the alleyway. At the end of the passage was the door into 'the back room' a coffee shop/debating society/chess club/illicit affairs rendezvous point. All friends entered through that back door, leaving the shop free for the occasional customer who dared to interrupt the debate taking place in the back.

One afternoon, Don asked to use the shop telephone. He was angry. His payslip had appeared in his pigeonhole at the police station, but a mistake had been made and he was £23 short. He put the phone onto loudspeaker so that we could hear him giving 'them' a piece of his mind. "I want to talk to someone about my wages" he asserted. The woman who had answered the phone replied, "I can help you with that, what's the problem?"

"I want to talk to a man, put me through to someone who knows what they are talking about".

The woman, clearly astounded, paused briefly and then very slowly and deliberately, leaving no room for misunderstanding snapped "Do you know who you are talking to? I am the Deputy Chief Constable for Hertfordshire." Don, as calm as the proverbial cucumber replied. "And do you know who YOU are talking to?" "No" came back the reply. "Thank God for that" replied Don and slammed down the phone.

Inspired by 'Watford In The 20th Century' by Oliver Phillips