

Celebrating 50 Years of Oxfam in Stevenage



A History of the Building at 11 Middle Row
and 7 & 9 Baker Street (the Oxfam Shop)

Peter Bentley

The building is more than 200 years old and Grade II listed. It has been used by Oxfam since 1971.

The Origins of Middle Row

Before the 13th century, Stevenage, then known as 'stithen ac' (place of the strong oak) was a small village around St Nicholas Church. In the early 1200s, most of the villagers moved to the ancient road that became the Great North Road. Here they could trade with passing travellers in what is now the High Street.

In 1223, King Henry III granted the lord of the manor, the Abbot of Westminster, the right to hold a market in Stevenage. This was confirmed in 1281 by King Edward I, who granted a royal charter entitling the Abbot to hold a weekly market and an annual fair at Stevenage 'on the vigil,



**Extract from 1834 Tithe map
showing the 'Middle Row' of buildings
in the High Street**

(Hertfordshire Archive and
Local Studies: DSA4/99/2)

feast and morrow of St John the Baptist' (23, 24 and 25 June). For this privilege, the Abbot had to pay the King.

The date of the fair was changed from June to September in 1821. The fair still comes to Stevenage every September.

The name 'Middle Row' originates from what was originally the middle row of stalls of market traders. Until the beginning of the 20th century, 'Middle Row' was the row of buildings between the pedestrianized street we now call 'Middle Row' and the High Street.

Interestingly, we can see where the medieval markets were held from the way that the High Street widens as one travels north towards Middle Row. The wide area



**Plaque above the Cutter,
9 Middle Row**



The mansard roof

of the High Street to the north of Middle Row continued as the site for a weekly market until 1961. Nowadays it is the site of Stevenage Farmers Market which is held on the second Saturday of every month.

Some of the buildings on Middle Row date back to the 15th century when the stalls began to be replaced by permanent buildings.

The Building

The building at what is now 11 Middle Row and 7 & 9 Baker Street was re-built following the Great Fire of Stevenage in 1807. The fire spread quickly through the thatched houses, destroying the southern half of Middle Row. In total forty-two houses were destroyed.

The building is by far the tallest in Middle Row. It is also the only business premise in Stevenage with a mansard roof. A mansard roof provides extra storage



The mansard roof

space as it has a steep slope rising from the eaves and a shallower slope reaching the ridge with an angle between the two.

The doorway at No. 7 Baker Street is only 6 feet high and is no longer used. It is considered '*a fine example of early nineteenth-century classical revival style*' (Margaret Ashby in Stevenage Streets).

The building was Grade II listed in 1948.



Doorway at 7 Baker Street

Uses of the Building

We don't know anything about the very earliest use of the building. However, in the 1860s and 1870s the part of the building that is now 11 Middle Row housed the Bakers Arms. On the opposite side of Baker Street, at what is now The Cutter barber shop, was the Buckingham Palace. This was the only pub in the British Isles ever to have that name. It opened in 1852 and beer was brewed there until 1874. The Bakers Arms and the Buckingham Palace were run by the Buckingham family who were also bakers. That is how Baker Street got its name.

We know from records of rates payments and the census that the Buckingham Palace was a 'public house' whereas the Bakers Arms was a 'beerhouse'. A 'public house' was licenced to sell beer, wines

and spirits, but could be inspected by the police at any time of day or night. A 'beerhouse', on the other hand, was not subject to inspection and could only sell beer.

The Buckingham Palace was owned by John Buckingham himself. The building that housed the Bakers Arms was owned by the Hornett family of Julian's Farm.

John Buckingham at the Buckingham Palace probably supplied his beer to the Bakers Arms. However, the beer did not always come from the Buckingham Palace. A meeting was held at the Bakers Arms in 1860 to protest to the brewers, McMullens of Hertford, against a price increase of their best country stout from three-halfpence to two pence a pint.

From census information we know that after the closure of the Bakers Arms, 11 Middle Row had a variety of inhabitants, including a groom (1891), a labourer (1901), and a joiner & timber dealer Sydney Swann (1911). Shortly after the census, Sydney Swann emigrated to Australia, arriving in Sydney(!) in February 1912.



The Cutter (formerly the *Buckingham Palace*) and the Oxfam shop (formerly the *Bakers Arms*)



The Cutter and Oxfam from the south-west



Middle Row ca 1910
(Courtesy Stevenage Museum)

The owner of the building before the First World War was William Fisher. He lived in Beckenham but, as owner of properties in Middle Row, he was entitled to vote in Hertfordshire County and Stevenage Parish elections.

Looking back one hundred years at Middle Row as a whole, there were a mixture of cottages and businesses. The businesses included a coal merchant, a meatballs shop, a horse-drawn cab depot, the Buckingham Palace at No. 9, Sydney Swann's joinery at No. 11 (now the Oxfam shop) and a boot and shoe shop.

From 1914 to 1929, 11 Middle Row was a second-hand furniture shop run by Mrs Dorcas Frances Pilkington. It was then taken over by the Eltridge family who sold fruit and vegetables, though Jack Eltridge listed himself in the 1929 and 1933 editions of Kelly's Directory of Hertfordshire as a 'general dealer'.

During the war, the shop was run by Mr & Mrs Briars. Jack Eltridge returned towards the end of the war.

By about 1950, the building was taken over by the Stevenage Electrical Company owned by Jim Burrows. Stevenage Electrical used 11 Middle Row as their showroom. The Eltridge family lived at No. 7 Baker Street as their tenant.

As well as selling electrical appliances, the Company did wiring work around the town and trained the town's electricians. In 1959 Stevenage Electrical Engineering Company sold the building to Middle Row Properties Limited. The shop at 11 Middle Row became the 'Floral Corner' flower shop, which continued to trade until the mid-1960s.

Before the Stevenage Electrical Company arrived, the south side of Baker Street, including numbers 7 and 9, was residential cottages. A single toilet at the Church Lane end, with its entrance on the street, was used by all the residents.

In 1958 planning permission was granted to use 9 and 11 Baker Street 'for making and repair of dentures', but it is unclear if this business was ever set up.

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1955



1975

(Courtesy William Wittering)

In 1960 the living premises at 7 Baker Street became a café and 9 Baker Street was converted into a shop. Planning permission was granted to use the floor above 7 Baker Street and 11 Middle Row as storerooms for the shop at 9 Baker Street.

By 1970 the first floor of 11 Middle Row had been taken over by Branded Discounts, a mail order clothing business.



About 1989

(Courtesy Brian Norman)

Oxfam Moves In

The Oxfam shop was set up at 9 Baker Street in 1971 by Daisy Blackford, a volunteer. She was 68 at the time and she continued as un-paid shop leader for more than ten years. Daisy worked five full days each week, including Saturdays, and always stayed on to cash up each day's takings. She was immensely proud of what she achieved.

By 1975, Oxfam had also acquired the shop at 11 Middle Row. However, until 1990, the 11 Middle Row and 9 Baker Street shops remained physically separate with a working men's café, the Baker Bar, in between at 7 Baker Street.

The 11 Middle Row shop sold children's clothes and 9 Baker Street sold clothes for adults. Both sold bric-a-brac.

There were small rooms above each of the Oxfam shops connected by a landing. There was a narrow spiral staircase from near the front of the 11 Middle Row shop and another staircase from the 9 Baker



About 1989

(Courtesy Brian Norman)



February 1990
(Courtesy Stevenage Museum)

Street shop. Customers who wanted to try on clothes had to go up the rickety stairs at 9 Baker Street to the changing room. They then often lost their way and ended up wandering round the sorting room!

Conditions for volunteers were basic with unsavoury outside toilets serving both shops!

Major Alterations

In 1990 and 1991 the shops were closed for nearly 12 months for major alterations.

Before the work to re-organise the shops could begin, the cellar of 11 Middle Row had to be filled in.

The shop we have now is the result of taking down the walls between the two small Oxfam shops and the café, which moved to 11 Baker Street. The two small sorting rooms on the first floor were made into one. Both staircases were removed and the staircase we now have at the back of the shop was installed.



February 1990
(Courtesy Stevenage Museum)

In 1992 planning permission was granted to convert the attic from office to residential accommodation. The attic is still used as a flat. The entrance is at 9 Baker Street.

In 2006 we stopped selling clothes. We have dabbled with clothes from time-to-time since then but, overall, we have found it best to stick to our core business of books & music, plus a few homewares.

The shop had a medium refurbishment in 2013. LED lighting and new flooring was installed. Overall, the refurbishment made the shop much brighter and more modern.

On-line Sales

In 2019 we began to sell more valuable specialist items through Oxfam's online shop www.oxfam.org.uk. This has so far been a very small part of our overall sales, but over the coming years a much greater proportion of donated items will be sold online.



Middle Row 1948
(Courtesy Stevenage Museum)



Middle Row 2021

Coronavirus

Sadly, as a 'non-essential business', the shop had to close for much of 2020 and early 2021 when there was a national or local lockdown. Many vulnerable and older volunteers were not able to volunteer during the pandemic, but the shop was open, albeit with reduced hours, when this was lawful. Oxfam took every step possible to keep customers, staff and volunteers safe through such measures as mask wearing and limiting the number of customers in the shop.

Middle Row

In 1975 there were just 7 businesses on Middle Row. There are now 19. The street lighting and paving are now appropriate for this historic area. As a result of these developments, the Oxfam shop is now at the hub of a pleasant "boutique" area.

People

Until the 1990s, Oxfam shops did not have paid managers. The volunteer in charge was 'shop leader'.

The shop would not have had the success it has over the years without the tireless dedication of shop leaders and managers as well as the hard work of hundreds of volunteers who have given their time to help end poverty.

Shop Leaders

Daisy Blackford (1971 to 1981)

Cath Edmunds (around 1984)

Shop Managers

Pauline Windsor (Aug. 1990 to Feb. 2002)

Pauline Rose (March 2002 to Jan. 2006)

Kathryn Keogh (Jan. 2006 to Oct. 2008)

Samantha Harvey (Jan. 2009 to Sept. 2009)

Kathryn Keogh (Oct. 2009 to Nov. 2020)

Becky Leach (August 2021 to present)

Looking forward

Over the last 50 years the Stevenage Oxfam shop has, through the money it has raised, saved the lives of thousands of people affected by disasters, and helped thousands more to work their way out of poverty. It will continue to raise much needed poverty-busting funds in the years to come.

Earlier Version of this Booklet

This is a revised and updated version of a similar booklet I produced in 2011 at the time of the Oxfam Stevenage 40th anniversary.

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Voluntary Admin Manager
Oxfam Stevenage
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Comments welcome

If you have any comments on, or information or photos to add, to this paper, please contact me at pbentley1@oxfam.org.uk

Sources of Information

I have compiled this paper from the memories of Stevenage residents, records of rate payments, electoral registers, trade directories, telephone books and the following books and papers:

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