

History of Kirkpatrick & Stevens Department Store

One of the features of Auckland Heritage Festival 2020 was an address by Lauraine Jacobs & Chris Chrystall, daughters of Graham Stevens, on the history of the family-owned Newmarket department store Kirkpatrick & Stevens.

Kirkpatrick & Stevens, or K&S as it was affectionately known, was opened in 1931 by Laurence Stevens (the girls' grandfather) and Robert Webster Kirkpatrick. Six years after the opening Robert Kirkpatrick died. Mr. McBain was employed as office manager.

The property at 187 Broadway ran through to Osborne Street (opposite Hayes Metal Refinery) and had a cart dock at the back. Many years later it was purchased by the National Bank.

Sons of the owners, Graham Stevens and Noel Kirkpatrick, would move into the business in the mid- forties. They both attended Auckland Grammar School. The school had a long affiliation with the store as it was one of many schools whose uniforms were stocked by Kirkpatrick & Stevens. In preparation for their involvement in the family business Graham trained for "life in a department store" at the iconic Milne & Choyce in Queen Street and Noel studied accountancy.

Kirkpatrick & Stevens was set up as a department store (3 floors) and offered menswear, ladies' apparel, (including an excellent lingerie section), children's wear (including school uniforms), hosiery, haberdashery, wool & knitting, linen (bedding & bath) and the jewel in the crown: fabrics, patterns and all the trimmings needed for both commercial and home sewing. (Patrick Steel could be found there picking up bits and bobs.)

Morning tea breaks and lunch breaks were often consumed playing pool or snooker upstairs on the third floor.

A family business from day one, the family was involved in all aspects of the store, from the operational side of the business to working on the counter in various departments. Mr. Stevens would lend his hand to laying lino and his wife, Patricia would be making curtains. Graham frequently worked the dress fabrics department and was an absolute whizz at mental arithmetic. With no computers he could easily calculate yardage of fabric @ x amount of dollars in his head!

It was not unusual for people employed in retail at the time to work their entire working life in the one company. K&S had many such loyal employees, including ladies-wear buyer Cliff Reichelmann, the menswear team of Arthur Mellick & Mick Burfoot, and the extraordinary Fabric buyer Geoff Puttick. In fact, Geoff joined the company when he was 12 years old and never worked anywhere else.

Lauraine & Chris attended Epsom Girls' Grammar school, while their brother Grant went to Auckland Grammar (like all the men in the Stevens family). The girls worked in the store during school holidays. They have fond memories of the camaraderie and friendship of Newmarket store owners at the time. Their father's rich community life included his Newmarket Rotary meeting every Tuesday and his catch up with racing syndicate mates during his tea break on a Friday night at the Newmarket Club.

These were the days in Newmarket when late night shopping was very popular. Many families would look forward to the Friday night excursion to visit K&S, McKenzies, Smith and Caughey's, Kitchener Shoes (to name a few) and of course the American Milk Bar for milk shakes, ice cream sundaes, and to play the amazing jukebox.

Over time, certain departments were shed as they became uneconomical. Furnishings was the first to go, later followed by childrenswear and womenswear. Graham Stevens had always said (after a lifetime in retail) that he was never interested in weekend trading nor was he interested in EFTPOS technology.

Kirkpatrick & Stevens ceased trading in 1985, perfect timing for retirement from the ever-encroaching technology age.