

Ray's Ironmongery

Ray's, established in 1810, was one of many Dedham shops which moved from one High Street premises to another. In the 1930s it occupied the site of the present Essex Rose tearoom on the corner of Mill Lane and was known as Major Ray's Bazaar. As was usual for shops in the village at that time, it sold a bewildering variety of merchandise, stocking everything from paint, distemper, stoves and oil lamps to gardening tools, galvanised pails, enamel jugs, clothes and footwear of all kinds including "dull rubber wellington boots at an astonishingly low price". Hardware included china plates, cups and saucers, which my parents remembered were placed on the scales and sold by weight in the 1930s. Merchandise set out on the pavement included a display of walking sticks and John Jennings told me that in those innocent days, Dedham boys would feel very daring helping themselves to a stick and walking round with it through Stratford St Mary before putting it back.



*Major Charles Ray's Dedham Bazaar
Established 1810, in the early 20th century*



*Eddie Ray's first showroom in
"Grandma's Greenhouse", 1926*

This shop closed on the outbreak of war in 1939 but since 1922 Major Charles Ray's son Edwin Charles (Eddie) had had his own business, setting up delivery services to Suffolk at first with a horse-drawn van purchased with his WWI army gratuity. His first showroom was in "Grandma's Greenhouse (after removal of the Grapevine)" in 1926. Since the 1930s a vast amount of extra stock had been kept at Rays' General Warehouses behind the then Post Office, where Piper House is now. There were petrol pumps outside, one at the front and three down Princel Lane. By the time I remember it in the 1950s Eddie Ray had incorporated the Post Office Stores, acquired by his wife Marion in 1917, into "Rays' Arcade". He took down a number of internal walls (some alarmingly were load-bearing!), so as to open it up as a department store and would usher customers a few feet from one counter to another for different purchases.

Amazingly the whole building did not collapse but it eventually burned down. After Eddie Ray retired the shop was owned by a Trust and managed by Wesley Downes and his son Barry. A fire broke out on 3rd June 1976 with flames forty or fifty feet high and a cloud of smoke visible for miles around. Loud bangs could be heard because of the large quantities of paint and Calor gas stored on the premises. Peter Rowe who lived in a flat at the back of the shop lost everything he possessed and a collection was organised in the village to help him fund replacements. Even his cat had gone missing but happily it reappeared some time later safe and sound.



Ray's on fire, June 1976. The part with double bay windows was the former Post Office

Sadly the burnt-out shop and the damaged boutique and hairdresser next door, both listed buildings of historic interest, were subsequently demolished.

After his wife died Eddie offered her clothes etc. second-hand for sale in the shop. He sold me three of her teaspoons (which he termed "a quarter-dozen"!) and a tablespoon for making coffee in my room at Oxford.

He used to fill the window of the shop with old photographs of daily and Dedham history covered with scrawled annotations conveying a vast amount of interesting information. Similarly he used to waylay people in the street and run on for hours with his reminiscences, talking at high speed so as to allow no pause which would give his listener a chance to break the flow and move on.

I think I may well have been the last person to see him alive. I had parked on North Hill in Colchester and was about to get in and drive home when he accosted me and said he wasn't feeling very well and could I give him a lift back to Dedham. He sat beside me apparently in excellent form and talking non-stop all the way. I dropped him off at the top of Princel Lane and the following morning he was found dead alone in his house.



A press cutting showing Ray's shop in the 1950s

© **Lucy Archer**