

Reaping the Whirlwind – Stanley Carter



One Christmas Eve there was a crisis in one of the other departments. We were slack in furniture so I went over to cover. Stanley Carter saw me there and exploded. ‘You’re sacked. Leave the building immediately.’ I stayed, but made myself scarce if I saw him coming. He seemed to be everywhere that day, but then he always was. Anyway, as we were closing down he came past and I couldn’t avoid him. ‘Night, Withers. Happy Christmas. See you on Tuesday.’ So I had a Christmas after all.

STAN WITHERS, CHRISTMAS EVE AT HEELAS OF READING, 1950s

He was a legend in his lifetime. He was more akin to Spedan than any of us.

MAX BAKER, CARTER’S DIRECTOR OF TRADING
WHEN HE WAS AT OXFORD STREET, 1973

A cynical retailing historian in 1955 might have summarised the Partnership like this. A successful established department store in Oxford Street, set up in 1864 by a self-made man on simple but robust trading principles, is taken over by his son over sixty years later. The son is a curious cove, with the lofty – but dangerously socialist – ideal of creating out of this successful shop a business empire for its employees and an ideas playground for himself. He spends money liberally on his staff and on expansion, extends rapidly in the 1930s but over-stretches. In that period he acquires four failing businesses in the provinces, three of which are on the coast, rebuilds his own Peter Jones store at great expense, and more than doubles the size of the original Oxford Street shop. By the end of 1940 this shop lies in ruins, as do two of the three coastal shops (and the other is hit in 1942). When he retires in 1955 his much-vaunted Partnership has only five times in the past eighteen years paid an annual Bonus for its long-suffering employees, who he insists on calling Partners as though they were his equals. An equality only of misery perhaps, for they enjoyed an average annual Bonus of under 2% in that period. And all this by insisting on running the business with a coterie of Oxbridge graduates good at passing exams in exotic but impractical subjects but with no prior retailing experience, and a handful of distinguished military men (ditto). Hardly a proper retailer among them. All right, he was unlucky with the Oxford Street bomb, but a good general makes his own luck, doesn't he? And here we are in 1955 and the expensive Oxford Street rebuild hasn't even begun yet. How long will that take?

That's by no means an unreasonable conclusion in 1955. But by the time of Miller's retirement in 1972 there had been a transformation. It was done with more contraction than expansion, and by taking John and Spedan Lewis's principles and applying them with imagination, intelligence, and a painstaking (and pains-giving) attention to detail. On Bernard Miller's unobtrusive but steely watch in that period were three key men. One was Max Baker, an experienced retailer when he arrived in 1932; the second, Paul May, had become one since arriving from university in 1932. The third made himself one under Spedan's eye in Oxford Street from the moment he joined as a sixteen-year-old school leaver in 1929, Stanley Carter. It was in 1955 that Carter returned from an unwise two-year spell at Selfridges, bringing back a recharged respect for the Partnership. We'll look at the wider picture, and the May and Baker contributions, in Chapter 15, but this chapter is about Carter and his revitalisation of Oxford Street. It will contain only about a quarter of the stories that are told about him. We'll go back to the beginning of his career, because it gives us a chance to track one individual through four difficult Partnership decades and into the safe haven of the 1970s.