

What Shall We Do With Waitrose?



The kind of promotional display common in Waitrose when Stanley Carter arrived as MD in 1967. Note the pattern clashes – and be grateful the photos aren't in colour. The Waitrose assortment's a little wider these days, too.

After a while I remarked one day to the director of trading that, if the drapery departments did not take care, they would find that Mr Webster's enterprising temperament had turned the Partnership into a food business with minor wings in the way of clothes and furniture.

SPEDAN LEWIS, JOKING ABOUT JOE WEBSTER,
RECRUITED IN 1937 TO BUY A FOOD BUSINESS

Upon the food business, Walton and May are inclined to think it is satisfactorily profitable. I am myself in favour of getting rid of it ...

Let's do it quickly while the going is good.

REPORT FROM BERNARD MILLER
TO SPEDAN LEWIS, FEBRUARY 1952

How had Waitrose fared in the thirty years between its arrival in 1937 and Stanley Carter's appearance there in 1967? The first quote at the head of the chapter was intended as a joke at the time, and doubtless Spedan would probably have been nonplussed by the position today. The second illustrates the dilemma in which Waitrose in its early days constantly placed the Partnership's management. With the arrival of the war, Spedan's dream of using this new small food chain as a springboard to a hotel business abruptly vanished. It then became a question of whether it was pulling its weight sufficiently to justify its demands on the Partnership's scarce capital resources, and – of course – its share of any Partnership Bonus once that could be restarted. During the war and the immediate post-war period the management's attitude to Waitrose was simply opportunistic. Individual shops were sold if they weren't making money. Small new chains in the London area were bought: Bees and Tees, and Schofield and Martin, and later a chain with a substantial wholesale business, Kinghams. None really added much – the Partnership's leaders had the best intentions, but they were tinkering. They didn't know what to do with it.

Waitrose – Low Margin, and Marginalised

Essentially Waitrose was at the Partnership's margin, a distant province rarely visited. The people who ran John Lewis, from Spedan onwards, were department store men to the hilt – none had ever worked in food. Almost all the Partnership's top officials had started life in the long John Lewis silk room. John Lewis in Oxford Street, despite the decline of the pre-war fabric trade, still had vast areas devoted to dress fabrics and furnishing materials, and its range and variety were staggering. Every week the Gazette listed the results of each department store and of each buyership. In 1966, the year before Stanley Carter moved from Oxford Street to Waitrose, each of seventy-seven department store buyerships was listed – Waitrose had five – and twenty-five trading branches, of which the whole of Waitrose was merely one. Until 1968, the year after Stanley Carter took it over, its turnover was below that of John Lewis Oxford Street alone. It was out of Partner sight, and out of the corporate mind. In Spedan's last full year the annual Gazette index has just ten entries for Waitrose. It has thirty each for Odney and the Sailing Club, 300 for the department stores – and over 200 for Spedan himself. Waitrose simply didn't matter.

For most of its early life in the Partnership Waitrose was run by Joe Webster. Known as 'Uncle Joe' – but with considerably more personal warmth than Stalin – he had been recruited in early 1937 when Spedan was considering the move into food. A grocer since the age of fourteen, he had been running the London region of the Co-op grocery chain, then a huge business, at the time Michael Watkins met him and lured him away. One key factor