

## CHAPTER 5

# Peter Jones – Thriving as Publicans



Peter Jones a little before John Lewis bought it. The King's Road frontage starts behind the three straw-hatted girls. The Star and Garter pub is on the right, bought by John Lewis in 1911 and one of the few 'departments' to make a profit.

He would arrive about four o'clock in the afternoon by taxi, for he had no car of his own at that time, usually at the Symons Street doorway, dash into our one and only antiquated rope-propelled lift and at once get down to work sending for the people he wished to see.

ROBERT BICHAN, WRITING IN THE GAZETTE IN 1967  
ABOUT SPEDAN LEWIS IN 1915

Sad experience of a wicked world may make it extremely difficult ... to believe that a programme so unusual and financially so disinterested can really be honest and have no catch in it.

SPEDAN LEWIS, RECALLING THE PETER JONES SHAREHOLDERS'  
MEETING OF 1920

Let's go back a couple of years to Peter Jones in the early days of the war, to see what Spedan was up against, and how he tackled his own shop and employees. We have an observant eye-witness, one who watched him from the shop floor and recorded his memories fifty years later. On 1 January 1915 the young sales assistant Robert Bichan took the train up from Streatham Common to Oxford Street to be interviewed by Spedan Lewis. Spedan remained standing at a desk in one of several cubicles acting as offices as he conducted a brief interview. He was satisfied: Bichan began at Peter Jones a fortnight later in the furnishing drapery department at £80 a year plus 1¼% commission on sales – about £100 a year in all. That was for hours that ran from 8.30 a.m. to 8 p.m., though the shop stayed open half an hour later in June, July and August, so for Bichan it meant leaving home at 7.15 and arriving back at about 9.45 at night. Bichan had been at the Bon Marché in Brixton, later to become a Partnership store a few months into the next World War. But, though Spedan was straining at the leash to start his profit-sharing scheme at Peter Jones, the business was far too rickety for him to contemplate that yet – if he ever would. Just how rickety Bichan was soon to find out, just as he discovered that it wasn't the stately upmarket emporium he'd anticipated. Take the stock for instance:

I was naturally very thrilled at getting work in what I thought would be a better class of trade than the suburbs, but I was really astounded to find such cheap, almost tawdry, goods displayed in the fixtures. I recall quite clearly that on one end of the counter was a pile of 31" gaudy patterned cretonnes priced at 3¾d a yard and, a week or so later, in came rolls and rolls of the same. Further investigation through the various departments found cotton sheets at 7s 9d a pair... men's suits at 29s 6d up to 3 guineas or so; all goods more suited to the Fulham Road or Walham Green than Sloane Square. All this puzzled me very much for within a stone's throw of our very doorstep every house in, say, Cadogan Square, Eaton Square, Eaton Place and all the surrounding squares and streets were occupied by families with a butler, often a footman, and a staff of servants.

It really was the most fantastic business for, although the nobility, the aristocracy, the stockbroker grade and all the people who occupied those huge costly houses in our district came to us almost daily, they did not buy their dresses, millinery and other fashion goods from us – not then anyway. Our trade with the upper classes was chiefly confined to the service departments, repairs, renovations, replacements of household equipment ... For instance they would not dream of coming to us for the curtains of their best rooms.

Now the staff. The war, said Bichan, had drained drapery firms of manpower, but that was helpful in Peter Jones' case for 'the quality of male assistants they had been struggling with left very much to be desired; by and large