

The Waitrose of Wallace Waite



An early Waitrose at 190 Acton Lane. Note that 'we save you money', not a typical boast of today's Waitrose.

The Founder wanted to get into the food business, and he may well have been right, but all he bought were ten little grocery shops ...

Small, inefficient, unimpressive, and it carried no weight. People thought it was a loser. Everyone was glad that we decided to keep its name. We didn't want the name and reputation of John Lewis dragged down.

STANLEY CARTER, WHO WENT ON TO RUN WAITROSE
FROM 1967 TO 1973, REFLECTING IN 1990

Michael Watkins bought on the Partnership's behalf those 'ten little grocery shops' in October 1937. At that time they were making a £21,000 profit on a turnover of £167,000, the equivalent of around £100,000 on £8m today. That was only 4% of the Partnership's trade at the time. By then Waitrose as a trade name had existed nearly thirty years – it was incorporated in 1908. Its origins went back four years before that, when three men in their early twenties opened a small shop at 263 Acton Hill in West London. Wallace Waite, Arthur Rose and David Taylor had split away from a grocery chain called Coopers, though, as the chosen name suggests, Taylor left early. And while Rose concentrated on the accounts, the real grocer was Waite.

Apprenticed at Twelve

Wallace Wyndham Waite was born in 1881, one of the eleven children of William Waite, an itinerant railway foreman who crisscrossed the country working on major railway projects. At one stage his team was building the railway bridge between Bath and Shepton Mallet, so at ten Wallace was at Shepton Grammar School, as the orphaned John Lewis had been nearly fifty years earlier – a nice coincidence. It was in early 1893, on the day before his twelfth birthday, that he was apprenticed for three years to a substantial grocer named Pegler in Pontypool, one of the places his father had lived. According to his daughter Monica, Wallace had wanted to become a farmer, and indeed had worked for the two previous years on his uncle's farm, but his father decided what each of his eight sons would do, and brooked no opposition. William Waite later went to work in China on the Kowloon tunnel project – and according to Monica stayed there, abandoning his family.

Wallace Waite told Monica how miserable he had been as a living-in apprentice of just twelve years old, working long hours and going to bed exhausted with nothing but a wedge of bread and a cup of cocoa. His wages were meagre – he received nothing in that first year, £5 a year in the second, and £10 in the third. Determined from an early stage to own his own shop, he saved half his wages and went to night school as soon as he could. That was in London, where he arrived in 1897 with the apocryphal pound in his pocket, going on to work for a series of grocers within cycling range of Paddington Station. Every Saturday he'd leave the shop when it closed at nine in the evening, cycle to the station, and take the last train back to Shepton Mallet to spend Sunday with Kathleen Hall, the daughter of a Shepton clothier. Early on Monday he'd be back on the milk train in time to open the shop. Eventually they married in Shepton in 1908 when he was twenty-seven. And by then he did have his own business.

In 1904 he was working for the Coopers branch in Woking, when the three young men found a shop to rent in a new shopping parade in West