

Montgomery

The little town of Montgomery stands at the very edge of the county of Shropshire... In the area we call Wales. I think we can take these boundary lines with a pinch of salt. Only in more recent, settled times have such borders been anything less than negotiable.

Traditionally a ford on the fledgling River Severn - at a point called Rhydwhyman - served as the dividing point between the Welsh and the English folk, and this is no more than a stone's throw from Montgomery. Offa's Dyke too is only a mile or so to the east.

Perhaps for that reason the town feels considerably more Saxon than Celtic. Certainly on my couple of visits to the place Welsh accents have been conspicuous by their absence. Is this a case of late colonialism or re-occupation ?

It is not simply the accents that make Montgomery feel English. This was an assize town, a frontier garrison and a county town, and all the paraphernalia of English social control is there in force. The ruins of the Norman castle peer down from above, and the square in front of the town hall suggests a planted town.

English justice has always had its winners and losers. The Georgian houses of the lawyers reflects the wealth and status of the former, while for the latter there are memorials a-plenty. There is the house of correction on Pool Road, the old county gaol (built in the 1730s) on the hill, and down in the valley its magnificent replacement, constructed in 1830. The building has now been taken over by a housing association.

If you want a tangible and physical sense of what law and order, crime and punishment, once meant, there's probably no better destination than Montgomery.

But that's not the reason I've brought you here. Nor the medieval church, with its lavish tombs of the Herberts. Nor yet the fine little museum, occupying an old temperance hotel in Arthur Street.

No, it's a shop I want to take you to.

Such is the shop's fame and fortune that Ann and John Welton (the couple who, as it happens, run the museum) have devoted a whole chapter to it in their excellent history of the town. The museum almost faces it, just a few doors further down Arthur Street. They call it Bunner's.

There's an early indication that this is somewhere out of the ordinary. One of those old petrol pumps, still in perfect working order, stands outside, still supplying the juice as it did when Austin Sevens tootled past.

But go inside and an extraordinary world unfolds. Bunner's is a hardware store, but one that reaches down to us from the golden age of hardware stores. In its cavernous interior - two floors, one a basement - you can find practically anything. Every kind of screw (sold loose) and light fitting, tap and gasket. Not to mention dolls

houses and cutlery and coffee-grinders and buckets and tea-pots and plant seeds and bicycle repair kits.

There's no point asking if they sell something; easier simply to ask directions. We looked for one of those spikes you can use to eat sweetcorn and found half a dozen kinds. I counted ten different sorts of mouse-trap. It was tempting to ask for fork handles, but they probably have to deal with that enquiry every day.

Robert Henry Bunner took over the old ironmonger's premises in Arthur Street back in 1891. Before that the place was a butchery, and the channels still run through the basement floor. Little has changed since. The Bunner family still preside, and the stock is forever growing.

"We're from Birmingham," I told the present Mr Bunner. "That's probably where half of this stuff comes from," he commented, surveying shelf upon shelf of metalware.

What's most appealing of all is that Bunner's feels like shopping used to be. Whichever Bunner is behind the counter (they're now in the fourth generation), he or she knows (remarkably) where everything is, and how everything works.

A colleague of mine, who lives in Oswestry, inherited from an aunt an old Second World War oil lamp, and went to Bunner's to see if they still sold the wick. Of course they did. How much did he want? "I've no idea," he replied. "How about a foot?" "Sounds about right," said a Bunner, and cut him a length. "How much would that be?" "Twelve pence" came the reply.

Robert Henry was quite the entrepreneur in his own right. Born in Marton, Shropshire, in 1872, he served his apprenticeship at Bishop's Castle, and took over the shop at the tender age of nineteen years. Then he opened a second shop in Broad Street to sell and rent cars and cycles. At one time Robert was the sole agent for Austin cars in the whole of Wales, and he had his finger in agricultural machinery and supplies too.

Thus he sold everything from a packet of pins to a combine-harvester. A particularly lucrative line was Montgomeryshire late-flowering red clover, which Bunner pioneered, and sold to farmers all over the country.

On R. H. Bunner's death in 1947, the firm was taken over by his son and, with a shrewd eye for what still sells, the shop continues today. Some things - like the castle and the church and Offa's Dyke itself - are meant to last.