



**16. Tony Grey & Ray Hannent:  
Ber Street, Black Anna, shops, fruit  
& veg, ladies of the night**

There wasn't that many shops in King Street, most of them were up the hill in Ber Street, or "the north end of the village" - because we were a village: from Southgate Lane to Thorn Lane east and west, north-south was Ber Street-King Street, and that was all a rabbit warren of houses, and that was a village. Most of the shops were in Ber Street; there were Italians, Jews, Germans, and course they would say, "Oh, he was interned during the War, and he had to go to the Isle of Man..." See, my grandfather was a wonder, he used to tell me all these things, and I've kept them in my mind.

**Tony Grey**

You must have heard of Black Anna - Antoinette Hannent. I think she was married to one of my grandfather's cousins. She was Italian, which until recent years gave me a misleading impression that my family might be Italian, but she married into the family and took the name, which is an old Norfolk name. Black Anna ran the pub on Ber Street, the "Jolly Butchers", which was famed, many of the American servicemen used to go there during the war and she used to have this jazz and blues singing. Fearsome woman - absolutely fearsome woman she was, you wouldn't mess with her. She used to come in my dad's shop and she dressed the same as they did in

Italy, all in these black clothes and that. As well as the pub she ran a lodging house where some of them were sort of down-and-out and others not so much so, but she used to keep them in order. You didn't mess with Black Anna. She was a big woman and pretty fierce, but a good jazz singer.

Ber Street was very much a trading street, there wasn't too much there in the way of residential things there apart from the people who had shops and lived over them. It was very much full of small shops, lots of pubs - a great number of pubs - some very small manufacturing things (Ninham's used to make cake mix, at the bottom where the corner is with Finkelgate) and the buildings on that side of the street are very much as they were. There are gaps where they have been changed, particularly down towards John Lewis, but that side of the street is very similar. It was customary for people to live above the shop in those days; I had a friend whose parents had a grocers shop further down and they lived above the shop initially before moving out to Bracondale. That was what tended to happen. The other side of the street was small shops, other trading things - some place used to deal with rabbit skins and goodness knows what - but what changed a lot in the area when I was there was that Archie King's had that scrapyard there.

Dad delivered, then he used to employ an errand boy and then when I learnt to drive I got sent out in his car to deliver all the orders. By that time things had

got much heavier and bigger and people had more. Only the more exotic things were imported. The basic things - potatoes, cauliflowers, tomatoes and so on - they were all locally grown. In fact once I learnt to drive I used to go out to Wards at Spixworth and get the potatoes and greenstuff, then there was another chap who had a nursery at St. Leonard's Road, Thorpe Hamlet, and he used to grow tomatoes and cucumbers. The imported things would be things like grapes and oranges and bananas, and when I was at school one of my Saturday morning jobs was to go in the stores and unpack the grapes and so on. They used to be packed in granulated cork, in barrels, because in those days perishable goods came in by ship so they were packed to endure the journey. One of Mr. Ward's delivery drivers saw this cork and said, "Ah - I can do with that to insulate my bungalow!" so he used to collect this from my dad and take it away and he poured it all between the joists of his house apparently, to act as insulation. In those days we didn't really think about such things, we just had plasterboard ceilings with nothing over top, but Derek, he was forward looking. But that was all the imported stuff - nearly everything else was locally grown. There were soft fruit farmers out Surlingham way, Dad used to get strawberries and those sort of things. So apart from the exotic fruits you couldn't grow here, it was all locally sourced, didn't have to travel far. The orchards at Surlingham - apples, pears, plum trees - they're all gone. And there

was a personal relationship between people - Dad still had friends well after he retired.

Ber Street was not the best of areas to live. I mean, I did learn a few things and you got a bit more streetwise as you got older. I used to keep my car in a lock-up garage down by Abrahams, which meant after an evening out I'd come home, put my car in the garage and walk back up to the shop, where I would then of course be accosted by the ladies of the night who plied their trade up and down the street. It got quite funny, because they would come up and ask me if I was interested in business and I would say, "Well, how much are you going to pay me?" and they used to giggle and go off and of course then they knew me and they knew not to ask me. It got quite funny because when a new girl arrived you would see them going, "Go and ask him," and they would all giggle because they knew what I would say to them. That was quite amusing, didn't bother me much, but it wasn't so good when my girlfriend would come to see me and walk from the city and be accosted by kerb crawlers and so on. So in that respect, it wasn't too good.

There was a lot of bomb damage around Ber Street. Part of what was the scrapyards was where other things had been bombed and down of course where John Lewis (Bonds) is, I can remember that being built. Before the scrapyards, a lot of it was just an open area. Alderson Street, near Finkelgate, all the houses around there were all

bombed or due for demolition. There were vestiges of the city wall too, in fact up by Ber Street Gates, near where I first lived, there is on what was the pub wall a bas-relief panel showing the old city gate there. So there were some pieces of that around at that time, plus a tardis-type police box that sat just by the old city wall. But at that time the main residential area really was between King Street and Ber Street - Mariners Lane, Horns Lane, Thorn Lane and lot of very high density old houses down there. It had the reputation of being a bit of a rough area. I didn't have many friends there.

The eastern side of Ber Street - the King Street side - that has changed almost completely. If you stand at the bottom of the road and look up the road from what is now Gerald Giles (which at the time I lived there was Abrahams wholesale grocers) on that left hand side I recognise nothing. It's all gone, until you get beyond Finkelgate, and then there is what used to be the council offices and some flats. They're the same. But on the side I lived, which was the odd numbers - the western side - quite a lot of the buildings are the same. My dad's shop and the shops adjacent, they're still there and relatively unchanged from the external point of view. There aren't so many though.

The whole street, when you walked down it, was principally shops, pubs and a few manufacturing and other trading things. There were two cycle shops, one of which closed and was

rented by my uncle who used to work for a company called Mills & Rockley which did hoardings and advertising posters and such. He worked in Ipswich but when they sold up he took over their clients in Norwich and he was one of the first people to do screen printing - he was an artist basically - and also one of the first people to spray fluorescent paint, which is not a good idea because it makes you ill, so he had a few days where he suffered with this; nowadays of course there would be an immediate health & safety warning! When the development happened with houses and flats he took one of the little industrial units they built. He was Jack Fitt and the company he formed was Fitt Signs who are now down Oak Street way. So there were a lot of small shops but not that many people who lived in houses on the street.

**Ray Hannent**