

Winter wonderland at Rossiters of Paignton



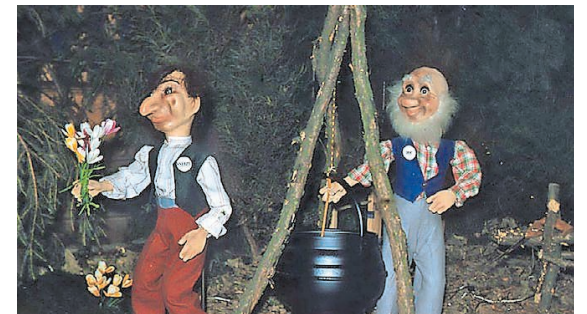
Father Christmas balances on a fully extended ladder outside Rossiters, December 1971 (PR25887)



The Christmas window display in 1993 (PR25634)

VERONIKA VALIGURSKÁ
Torquay Museum

Loved by many, the department store Rossiters was part of Paignton for 150 years. It was a place offering not only unique and high-quality items but also a warm welcome and a strong sense of community.



Rossiters' Christmas Grotto - Sneezy and Doc, in December 1959 (PR25746)

The first shop, founded in 1858 by sisters Sarah and Jane Rossiter, was located at the top of Winner Street.

At the time Paignton was an agricultural community and not a centre for trade but thanks to the sisters' knowledge of fashion this bold enterprise proved to be highly successful.

A few decades later when Paignton was growing rapidly and was becoming a popular tourist resort, Rossiters moved to larger premises in Palace Avenue, the thriving heart of the town. Rossiters was an important part of the community.

Window displays reflected events of the time like coronations or innovative new fashions.

It remained a successful family business throughout the 20th century, providing exceptional service. It is even reputed to have been the inspiration for the TV series 'Are You Being Served?'.

One of the many things that came to mind when the department store is mentioned is its ability to make Christmas magical for children and adults alike.

A visit to Rossiters' wonderland was a must on everyone's Christmas shopping list.

Every year hundreds of people would gather on Palace Avenue to await the arrival of Father Christmas in style.

There were years when he arrived by car, motorbike, horse-drawn carriage, boat, air and even on a vintage fire engine.

In 1971, Paignton firemen helped Santa to scatter toys to children in the street from a turntable ladder while hoisted 40ft in the air.

After he had switched the Christmas tree lights on, he opened the Christmas Grotto.

For many children the highlight of their visit was following a trail of white, snowy footprints through the store to Santa.

The grotto was not like many others seen in various toy departments at Christmas but a full-scale attraction featuring many fascinating spectacles that remain in people's memory.

"I remember going there at Christmas. We rode in a swan to Nursery Rhyme Land. Also they did Snow White one year. You walked through the wood seeing the dwarfs and wicked witch on the way. Soon you came to the cottage where an animated Snow White sat sewing. It was so magical," recalled museum social media follower Angie.

In 2009, after 150 years of serving the people of Paignton, Rossiters closed its doors for the last time.

It is greatly missed but its story will not be forgotten as the Rossiters archive is now held and cared for at Torquay Museum.

If you enjoy seeing old images of Torbay follow the museum's social media. This month, the museum is sharing photos of winter, snow and all things Christmas!

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