

Interviewee: Betty Findlay	Interviewer: Nancy McLucas
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**Mrs Betty Findlay:** In 2008 Nancy McLucas interviewed Betty Findlay about the history of the family firm, Findlay's drapers in Stranraer. The period covered by this interview is 1896-1981 and includes a great deal of information about how the stock held in the store changed over time, as well as considering issues relating to staffing such as changing staff roles and the introduction of staff holidays.

*...Would you tell me how the business started please?*

The business started with John Findlay from Port William. He was born in 1871 and served his time in a draper's shop in Port William called, I think, Kinneair's. Later, he moved to Stranraer to a firm called William Brown, Draper, Hosier and Hatter, at 72-74 George Street, Stranraer. When he left William Brown's shop he moved to 14 Hanover Street and started up his business there [on] November 21<sup>st</sup> 1896. It seems that the family lived above the shop at that time, from early records and birth certificates from that time.

*And why did he go into business for himself?*

Well, it's interesting that he choose to go in for drapery and outfitting, because most of the family had been boat builders and joiners, cabinetmakers. There were fleshers further back in the family, and I always wondered why it was that he went in for drapery. However, I find that his mother was a milliner so no doubt she had an interest in clothes. And then, there was somebody, I think a cousin, also had a drapery shop in Port William, so it wasn't a completely new idea for him to go off and start up a business on his own in Stranraer.

*Why did he choose Stranraer?*

I think that one of the reasons he went to Stranraer was that it wouldn't have been fair for him to set up in Port William, where Kinneairs still existed and where he had trained. Also, there was this cousin had this shop there so I think it was a case of going off to pastures new. I think, also, that his mother was rather ambitious for him. The story goes, in family legend that his mother used to walk to Stranraer with clean linen and baking every week. Now, I expect she got many lifts in carts and so on, but the fact that that story existed seems to suggest that part of the thing was her ambition.

*When he did start, obviously, he was unmarried and living above the shop, was it easy to get premises do you know?*

I don't know that... But he was married just shortly after he started up in business, and the first baby was born at 14 Hanover Street.

*So his mother would be bringing him clean clothes and food when he was still working with the other draper.*

That's what I assume, yes.

*How did the business go on from then?*

Well, it seems that they moved to...44 Hanover Street...and certainly that had happened...somewhere about the turn of the century. They seemed to have moved along to number 44 Hanover Street. And that was really where the shop existed. The matter of what the business was called is quite interesting. It hasn't always been

Findlay's. At one time it was John Findlay Outfitters, and there are other names, on labels and coat-hangers and the like, which say Findlay's Drapery Warehouse. So it had different names at its start. Also it wasn't all outfitting to begin with. They used to sell household linen and rugs and linoleum. In fact, one of the ex-employees had said to me recently how he remembers the rolls of linoleum standing up in the street, outside the shop. [There] was household linen, carpets, rugs, bed linen, every kind of sheet and pillowcase you can think of. Haberdashery - endless buttons and reels and so on, some of which were still in the shop when the business finally closed, and some of which are still in my possession.

*Was it a successful business from the start?*

Yes, I would say it was. I think there was a great need for a shop in a fairly isolated place like Stranraer, because people couldn't get to Ayr or Glasgow for shopping. And Mr Findlay used to go to Glasgow to buy stuff at the warehouses and bring them back down to Stranraer. Stuff used to arrive by rail too, because I have heard that the apprentices used to go with barrows to the station to bring things up to the shop.

*When you say apprentices, what were they apprenticed to? Was it the drapery trade?*

Yes. I suppose it would be.

*What kind of apprenticeship was that?*

Well, they weren't all trained in tailoring. Some of them were laying linoleum and learning, generally, about shop-keeping.

*So Mr Findlay was a tailor?*

No. He didn't make clothes himself, but he would measure people for suits and send the measurements off to manufacturing firms. ...He was a business man, he was buying and selling really.

*He was also locally quite involved?*

Oh, yes, very much so. There are photographs of him standing with the tennis club, with the bowling club...with the town band. Which seems to me to suggest that possibly he was involved in the setting up of these organisations. [He was on the Town Council.] He was what they call a burgess, and he seemed to have been a burgess for a good number of years. He was elected to the Town Council on the 5<sup>th</sup> November 1924. By this time he was living at 42 Hanover Street, in the flat above the shop. And he retired [from the Town Council] on the 12<sup>th</sup> June 1946...although it was about the same time that he retired from the business.

*Was he ever Provost or Dean of Guild?*

No, not that I know of. But he was very active in the Scottish Retail Drapers' Association and in all sorts of things that were going on in the town, as was his wife. She was a second wife, she was Jessie McCash, and they were married in 1905. By that time they were living at 14 Hanover Street and then John Findlay bought land in Royal Avenue and built the two houses now known as Arranview. And they moved there somewhere about 1906. I'm not quite sure exactly, but about then. And they had three children. And the interesting thing was that when the flat above the shop became vacant, the flat was called 42 Hanover Street...John Findlay wanted to move round to Hanover Street to live in the flat above the shop, which the family all thought was a strange move. But John Findlay was keen to be near the business, and to be able to stand in the street and see who was going up and down, according to what I hear.

*That would help with his Town Council work?*

Yes, I suppose so, because he was well known.

*So, was your husband, John Findlay's son, was he always destined to go into the business?*

Well, no, not really. But he had an elder brother, John, who died when he was about a year old, and John was to have been the outfitter. However, he died when he was a child and thereafter Kenny Findlay was named as the person to be the shopkeeper. It wasn't, I think, what he wanted, but that was how things were to be.

*He would have his War service?*

Yes, that's correct. He was away during the War and during that time it was Alex Stevenson who ran the shop. Alex Stevenson had been excused military service on health grounds, and while Kenny Findlay was away in the forces Alex Stevenson ran the shop.

*How many people did John Findlay employ?*

I'm not sure how many he would have at one time, not more than about six or so. The names of the people that were employed in the shop are all on record. There was a John McCloy was one of the first early employees and then there was Sam Campbell and Alex Stevenson, whom I have already mentioned. There was a Billy McCovan, who was killed in a road accident on the A75. A Charlie Stewart, John Agnew, Robbie Rice, Ralph McLaughlin, Graham Anderson and Hugh McCloy. Now, that is all I can remember in the way of menfolk. As far as the women are concerned there was a Mary McCloy, a Mary McKnight. Betty Davidson, a Betty Keeler, a Marie Wallace, Heather Croucher, somebody called Yvonne, an Irene Adams, Betty Murray, Grace Irvine, Dorothy Murphy. ...There were a lot of people involved in the shop, but how many at any one time I am not quite clear.

*He obviously employed people from the same family, like McCloy.*

Yes, I think John McCloy and Hugh McCloy would be related. The McCloy family had a shop of their own in Stranraer at one stage. ...the same thing, outfitting...I think it was further along Hanover Street, but I'm not quite clear.

*I know from Mrs Brownhill that at one point there were twelve drapers in Stranraer, so it must have been well draped?*

Yes, well to get back to what I was saying earlier, it was to do with the fact that it was difficult for people to get to Ayr or Glasgow to do their shopping, so there was a ready market for stuff in Stranraer.

*Now, I know you wouldn't remember the War years, obviously, but you must have heard anecdotes about what it was like during the War with coupons and stuff like that.*

Oh, yes, indeed. The stock was run right down because it just wasn't possible to get goods to sell. But the other side of it was that anything you could get hold of, sold. You didn't need fancy advertising to get things to sell.

*And they did advertise regularly?*

They didn't have to. There were adverts in the Free Press. If you look back the old Free Press's, but there wasn't much need for advertising during the War.

*What did they do about coupons and things?*

...There were coupons found in the shop when I was clearing it. ...They must have dealt with coupons.

*Did that not cause a lot of extra work?*

Well, I suppose it did but I don't really know. I wasn't around at that time, but it would...yes. But talking about rules and regulations and so on, one of the things that

I found quite interesting was there was a notice up in the shop dated January 1935 which was to do with the hours that the apprentices were allowed to work. And it names four young people, Mary or Molly Lamb, Sam Campbell, Kinnoch Findlay or Kenny Findlay and Robin Gibb. And they used to start work early in the morning, about half past eight, and had a little break for lunch and they worked on till about half past five at night. They got a half day on a Wednesday, but on Saturday nights they worked till eight forty-five at night. Very, very long hours. And they started work in the shop at fourteen. It's very different to what life is like nowadays for fourteen year olds. There can't have been time for much juvenile delinquency!

*Have you any idea how much they were paid?*

No, I haven't...I've got nothing about wages.

*They must have had insurance stamps and things like that?*

Oh, yes, they would.

*Looking on to the time that you remember, can you tell us about the business then, once you became involved?*

Well, by the time I came back to Stranraer, Kenny Findlay was in charge of the shop and Alex Stevenson had moved off and started up on his own. Immediately after the War, the stock was run down considerably and, of course, had to be all built up again. Kenny's parents had died. John Findlay had died just immediately after the War, and so it really was like starting from scratch. And Kenny had been away in the forces, in the Royal Marines, for four or five years and so hadn't any recent experience really in outfitting. But he built up the stock. I suppose he would get a gratuity from the forces which would help him to start up on his own. He could have gone on and done other things, he was interested in electronics. But his father and mother were both poorly by this time and he felt that he ought to come back and get into the business. It was expected of him anyway. And his father handed the business over to him on the 26<sup>th</sup> March 1946...just after he was demobbed.

*His father would be able to put him in the way of suppliers and stuff like that?*

Oh, yes. And, of course, there were customers in the town who knew the shop and kept in touch.

*And was there any specific changes that Kenny made?*

Yes, the main thing that he did was to cut down the number of lines that his father had stocked. ...There were less household goods, less drapery and it was more outfitting, ladies and gents outfitting really. Because, by this time, people were looking for choice in the shops. So you couldn't just stock a little of everything and hope that the goods would walk out of the shop. You had to cut it down and give people choice in what you were stocking. He also began doing more camping goods, and scout and guide uniforms.

*Of course, he was very involved in scouting. Was he the only scout and guide provider in the town?*

I think so. ...In fact there is a Thanks badge somewhere or other for having stocked all the stuff for the Scouts. ...The scout movement issue a Thanks badge to people who have provided a service for the movement.

*Is it something that can be put up in the shop?*

No, no, it is just a little badge, which will go to his grandson.

*What memories do you have of the shop?*

When I first came to Stranraer the first thing I noticed was that there was a shop that

was stocking Kayser Bondor<sup>i</sup>, which was much to my pleasure, as they say in this area. Something else that I remember very vividly are the red chairs that were in the front shop. People used to come in, perhaps to buy things and look at what was in the shop, but also just for a chat. And it was a great feature of the shop, I think, that the staff didn't force their sales on people. And so, it was a very friendly kind of social centre. And I used to say that there was more social work done in Findlay's shop than I ever did in the Social Work Department.

*Every business has its financial troubles. I'm meaning in particular bad debts or perhaps dishonest employees. I take it Findlay's wasn't immune from this?*

Well, of course, there are always people who don't pay their bills. And in Stranraer, of course, I think we suffered from what we used to call the 'milk cheque' business [whereby]...sometimes the farmers didn't pay till the milk cheque came in. Which didn't help us because we had to buy the goods to sell in the shop, and they had to be paid for. ...Mainly they settled, though when the shop closed there were some outstanding accounts which were never paid.

*Did you ever have any trouble with employees? Were there any, like there are nowadays, trade union health and safety regulations?*

Yes, there were. I remember having to put in ventilators, and then the VAT returns which had to be done [and] which every shop had to cope with. I, in fact, used to do the VAT returns myself. ...The shop was supposed to be at a certain temperature. I don't think it was, but there wasn't much in the way of inspection as far as I can remember.

*What about time off for the employees?*

Oh, yes, the employees had to get their annual holidays, which, of course, was very difficult for us because they mainly wanted their holidays in the summer and, of course, so did we.

*Again, the hours would be better than the hours for the apprentices?*

Oh, yes. We've gone on past that a number of years... By the time I knew the shop, people were working reasonable sort of hours. It would be nine to five, more or less, and half day on Wednesday as far as I remember.

...This is about the time when the new shop front was put in. There had been money inherited from New Zealand and this was used to put in a new shop front and Alex Donnan from Port William who was a Findlay cousin, came up and fitted the new shop window. We had a rather funny incident one day when Kenny Findlay's elder son, Christopher, was lost, not to be found anywhere. And then was discovered in the front window, dressed in his pyjamas shaping lumps of putty, with the passers-by all laughing at him.

*What was the shop front like before the new shop front [which is now McAndrews]?*

Yes, it's now McAndrews. Well, it was just much plainer. There wasn't as much wood to it, it didn't look nearly so solid. It was, in fact, beginning to rot and really had to be replaced.

*But it was a plate glass window'?*

Oh, yes. Yes.

*Can you remember anything else that happened during your sojourn with the business when you were in Hanover Street?*

Well, I used to go into the shop at Christmas sometimes to help out if they were very busy. But generally speaking I didn't work in the shop. One of the things that always

amused me was that if you were serving the ladies in particular they always had to tell you that they had great difficulty getting things to fit because they had round shoulders or a narrow waist or a long neck...there was always something that made it difficult. But we usually managed to get them fitted.

*When you say you helped out at Christmas, what kind of things, it wasn't just clothes, did you sell...?*

Oh, well, we sold handkerchiefs and scarves [and socks] but gone were the days when we had lots of haberdashery or linoleum or carpets, rugs, doormats, that was all away.

*Tell me about the rundown of the business.*

Well, the business ran really on full tilt until Kenny Findlay died and that was the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1980. I kept it going, but really it was Margaret McCloy who was in charge, who did most of the work. And we kept it going because the stock was already ordered for Christmas 1980. And we ran the business till we had the Christmas and then, in February 1981, we closed the door. [...and we had a sale before we closed.] We advertised that everything was to go at half-price. We got advice from the Retail Drapers' Association and they said that that was the best thing to do. One of the things I remember about closing down the shop was that we had the pavement lined with all sorts of things that we were chucking out, and a lady came past and she sort of shook her head and sighed and said, 'Oh, it's been a long Findlay's, hasn't it?'

*...When you say you had things out on the pavement, was that allowed?*

It must have been. But we never had things on the pavement in my day. There's a photograph of Findlay's further back. I suppose not long after they had moved into 44 Hanover Street, and there are things out on the pavement then.

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<sup>i</sup> Kayser Bondor was a very popular hosiery manufacturer at this time.