

F.W. Wilkes, Great Colmore St., Birmingham

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Introduction

Many modern trade tokens are purely functional in nature and give insufficient details to allow conclusive attribution. Those with just names or initials can be challenging to research and require other corroborating information such as personal knowledge, a documented find or links with other tokens that include more details of the issuer, the use or the series. However, some tokens include more information that allows the issuer and his business to be traced more easily. This note presents one example of such a token.

The Token

The token shown below falls under the classification – Names, Trades and Places – in the author's collection. In this case the token also displays the name of the street, which certainly helps with the searches.

Obv. **F. W. WILKES / FRUITERER / & POUTERER /**
G^I COLMORE S^T / B'HAM

Rev. **1/-**

Details. Br, 24.12mm, plain edge. Shown $\times 1.5$.



The Shop (i)

A first quick search via Google produced an instant hit with an image of the shop dated 4 July 1964. Zooming in on the image, the signboard also includes; Poultry, Fruit, Veg and Licensed Dealer in Game.



F.W. Wilkes' shop on the corner of Great Colmore St. and Pigott St., Lee Bank, Birmingham.
© Birmingham Images, Library of Birmingham.⁽¹⁾

The Issuer

This promising start prompted a more detailed search and working with the usual genealogical search engines allowed the history of Wilkes and his family to be determined as follows.^(2,3,4)

In the **1891** Census – Frederick W. Wilkes (43) was a lodger at 9 Gough Street, Birmingham, a general fruit salesman born in Rubery, Worcestershire. He was lodging with the family of Joseph Long, a Milk Dairyman. He married in **1898**, Wife Jane Elizabeth (Jinnie) Jones (1873-1948) of Staffordshire.

The **1901** Census has Frederick W. Wilkes (33) Greengrocer and Fruiterer living at 123 Great Colmore St., with his wife Jane Elizabeth (27) with son Frederick William (2) and Emily Jones, Sister in Law (14).

Staying at 123 Great Colmore St. the **1911** census has Frederick W. Wilkes (43) and his wife Jane E. Wilkes (37) with their sons Frederick W. Wilkes (12) and Albert E Wilkes (8) (one child had died) and nephew Walter Wilkes (12) were living with three boarders. The Wilkes were Fruiter Shop keepers, two of the boarders were shop assistants and the third was a servant.

On 19 March **1934**, Frederick W. Wilkes died aged 66. His will went through probate on 3 May 1934, with beneficiaries his wife Jane Elizabeth Wilkes and eldest son Frederick William Wilkes. His son Frederick William Wilkes died just a few years later (1899-**1938**).

The **1939** register⁽²⁾ has; Jane E. Wilkes born 10 June 1874, widowed, (unpaid domestic duties), Albert E. Wilkes born 13 September 1902 (wholesale-retail fish, fruit and vegetables) living with Mary E. Tomkinson b.1876 and Nora Rowbottom b.1917 as domestic helps at 21 Yew Tree Road Birmingham. This address is just a couple of streets away from the shop on Great Colmore Street (see later for map).

The Business

In the same manner a timeline for the business can be devised from the entries in the Birmingham trade directories, especially Kelly's, as follows.⁽²⁾ Along with searching for Frederick W. Wilkes and finding the addresses, it is also useful to find the names of other traders that preceded or followed him at the address in question. The following details are found.

Frederick William Wilkes, fruiterer and greengrocer at 123 Gt. Colmore St. . . .1900] 1901. . .1921. . .[1933. . .
At this address: 1876 Edward Burley, 1880 William Davis, 1882 Edward Davis all provision dealers and then 1896 George Price Greengrocer. Following Wilkes' departure, Richard E. Round a plumber was using the address in 1933.

Frederick William Wilkes, fried fish dealer at 103 Gt. Colmore St. . . .1901] 1904. . . [1912. . .
At this address: 1880 George Handcock, dairy.

Frederick William Wilkes, fruiterer and greengrocer at 118 Gt. Colmore St. . . .1921] . . .1932. . .1936. . .
Previously at this address: Enoch Lawrence, 1912 and Edgar H. Cox, 1921 both beer retailers.

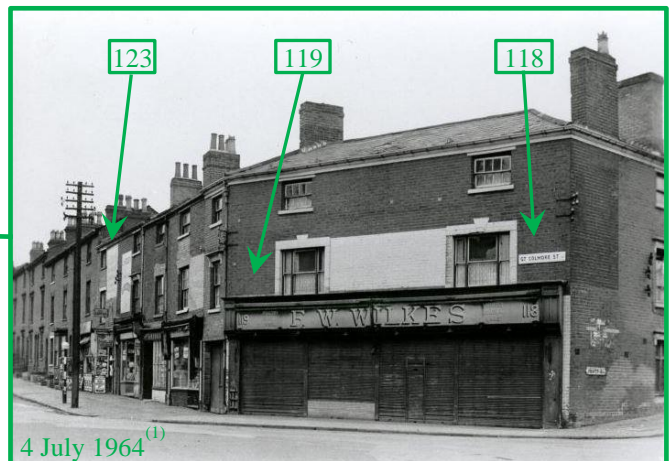
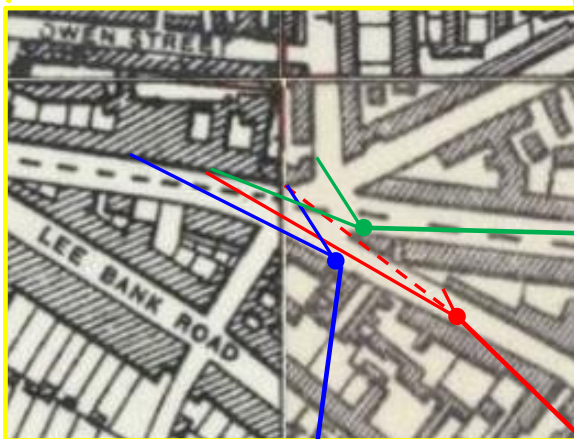
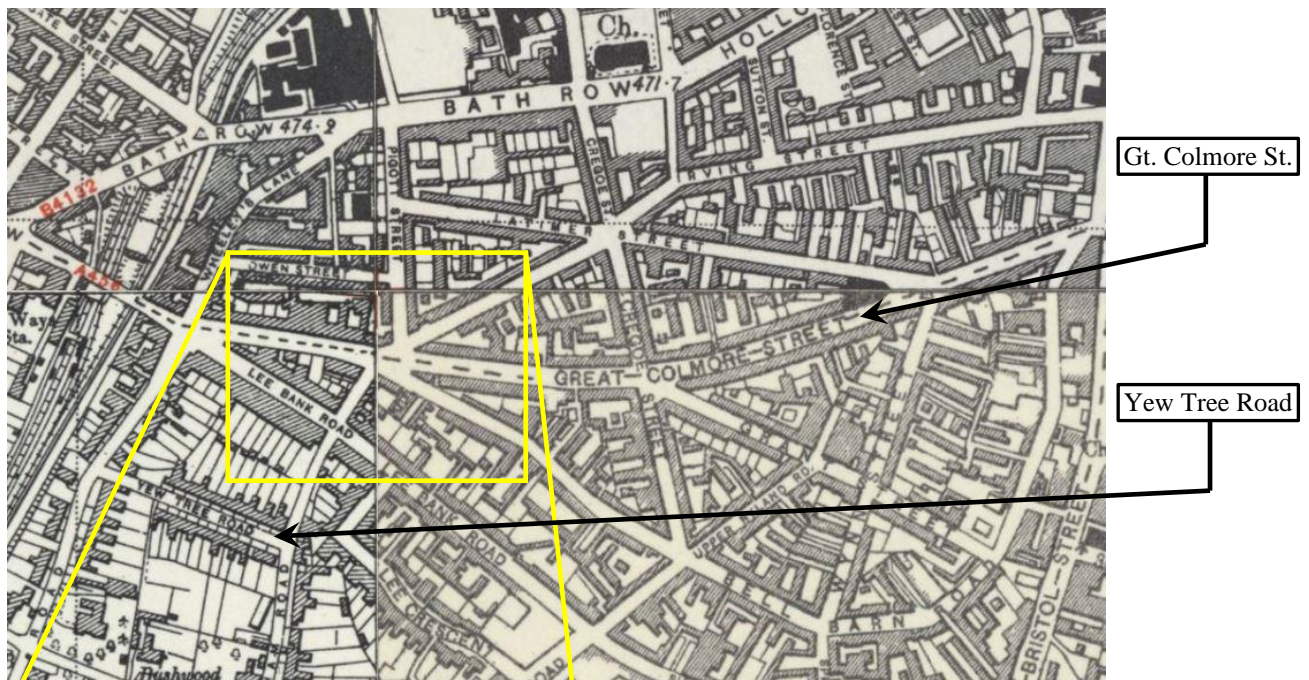
Later directories cannot be found online, however, local knowledge comes to the rescue and the photograph shown above has the Wilkes shop still existing on 4th July 1964, which was a Saturday. For a greengrocer's shop to be closed on a Saturday is highly unlikely. This is just a few years before the whole of the Lee Bank area of Birmingham was redeveloped and the shop has already closed down.

It is interesting that the shop still carried the name F.W. Wilkes, after F.W. Wilkes (I) had died in 1934 and his son F.W. Wilkes (II) had died in 1938. The business was taken over by a second son, Albert E. Wilkes who would have been 61 years old in 1964.

From 1963, two shops are listed under this name in the High Street at Harborne and Hagley Road, Edgbaston. These new shops are likely being run by members of the next generation (see below).

The Shops (ii)

Whilst carrying out these searches, two further images were found⁽⁵⁾ that showed the shops on Gt. Colmore St. from just a few years before the whole area of back-to-back terraced housing and businesses was demolished and redeveloped, including the new inner ring-road – the A4540. The location of Wilkes' shop is somewhere under the new green area called Sunset Park. All three photographs are reproduced below along with a map showing the location of the photographer (Ordnance Survey, 1938, 1:2500 or 25 inches to the mile).⁽⁶⁾ Frustratingly the shop premises are on the intersecting corner of four maps!



Ephemera

The Wilkes business also makes appearances in the newspapers.⁽⁷⁾ In the Birmingham Daily Post (Tuesday 26 July 1910 p2 col2) F.W. Wilkes contributed 3 harness horses and cobs to a large auction of similar animals the next day. A few years later he sold “3 good vanners” in a similar auction, Birmingham Daily Post (Wednesday 08 July 1914 p1 col 4).

The estate of F.W. Wilkes is summarised in the Evening Despatch (Tuesday 12 June 1934 p7 col5). Under the heading Other Estates. “Mr. F.W. Wilkes, 21, Yew Tree-road, Edgbaston, retired fruiterer, £18,995 (net personalty £11,067); left £500 and two freeholds in great Colmore-street, Edgbaston, to his nephew Walter Wilkes; 118, Great Colmore-street equally between his sons Frederick W. Wilkes and Albert E. Wilkes; money at bank to his wife; residue to his wife for life, then equally between his said two sons and their children.”

The Birmingham Mail (Thursday 22 June 1939 p4 col3) carries an advert under situations vacant: “Fruit trade, smart man, able to drive a lorry, Wanted: running repairs, used to trade; Interviews 12 to 2 and 6 to 7. F.W. Wilkes, Great Colmore St.” Recruiting continues, and the Birmingham Mail (Tuesday 01 August 1939, p3 col5) has another situation vacant: “Fish and Fruit trade – Clean man or youth wanted for poultry block and assist generally. – Interviews 12 till 2 and 5 till 7. F.W. Wilkes, Great Colmore St.”

Twenty years later in the Birmingham Daily Post (Thursday 19 May 1960 p14 col 3) the business is recruiting again with “Part time or full-time Women assistants wanted, fruit trade. – Apply F.W. Wilkes, 118, Great Colmore St.”

The Birmingham Daily Post (Wednesday 19 September 1962 p7 col8) brings the story to a nice conclusion with an advert confirming the Colmore Street business was still operating in 1962 and that two new premises had been opened a few miles away.

Further ephemeral F.W. Wilkes’ items might exist; a bill-head, a cheque, or a receipt and maybe a family photograph, but for now the token remains the only tangible piece of evidence.

Conclusions

This note has followed the life and business of F.W. Wilkes; from the founder’s birth to the setting up of shops in Great Colmore Street, Birmingham, to him becoming a successful businessman. The business was handed down through the family until they had to leave the area when it was demolished as part of the redevelopment of the centre of Birmingham sometime after 1963. Those redevelopments did not fare well and had become another slum by the 1990s and have since undergone another complete clearance and redevelopment.

The tokens are likely part of a dividend payment system and would have been issued sometime 1901-1963. From the style of the reverse it is probably pre-1930.

Sources and Acknowledgements

- (1) <https://www.search.birminghamimages.org.uk/>
- (2) <https://www.ancestry.co.uk/>
- (3) <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/>
- (4) <https://www.familysearch.org/en/>
- (5) <https://www.birminghamforum.co.uk/>
- (6) <https://maps.nls.uk/view/115633362>
- (7) <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>

Thanks to the British Newspaper Archive for the final image of F.W. Wilkes’ advert.

