Woolworths pick and mix: the story

From the sweeties.net wiki

Woolworths, known to generations as Woolies, sold loose sweets by weight in British high streets for a hundred years. Its sweet counter, which customers nicknamed pic'n'mix, became so well known that for many people the two words still mean Woolworths.

An American idea

The idea began in Frank Woolworth's American stores, which introduced cheap weigh out sweets in 1886. When the first British Woolworths opened in Church Street, Liverpool, on 5 November 1909, its buyers set out to match the American offer, importing much of the first stock from New York while they found British suppliers. The shop sold twenty English varieties of sweets at tuppence a quarter pound, and early suppliers included Barker and Dobson, maker of Everton Mints, and Cadbury.

Weighed on the counter

For decades the sweets were weighed out by staff on Verity scales with imperial weights. Customers had long called the counter pic'n'mix, and in the 1950s the firm adopted the name itself: see why is pick and mix sold by weight?

Queues and rationing

When sweet rationing began in 1942, there were long queues at Woolworths pic'n'mix counters, and when it ended in 1953, the museum says, the whole nation joined the queue: see sweet rationing in Britain

Top of the market

Woolworths advertised hard. In 1959, for its golden jubilee, it ran a million pound campaign in the press, cinema and, for the first time, on television, and a pre packed carrier bag of pic'n'mix, snacks and chocolate bars proved a hit. The mid 1970s brought The Wonder of Woolworth campaign, the early 1990s a pick and mix advert with a catchy jingle, and in 2001 Ant and Dec told shoppers not to forget what they came in for. Under its owner Kingfisher, Woolworths grew into the largest confectioner in Europe in the 1980s and 1990s, and at the turn of the century it was the largest customer in the world of Cadbury.

The beginning of the end

In 2004 Woolworths decided to cut back its range of sweets and hand the buying to an outside supplier, a decision the Woolworths Museum calls the beginning of the end. After heavy losses, and with credit squeezed by the 2008 financial crisis, the retail business entered administration on 26 November 2008. All

807 shops closed between 27 December 2008 and 6 January 2009, and 27,000 jobs were lost. The very last bag of Woolworths pick and mix later sold for £14,500 at a charity auction: see the biggest bag of pick and mix

After Woolies

Pick and mix did not disappear with Woolworths. It lives on in supermarkets, sweet shops and online, still sold the way Woolies sold it, by weight: see the history of pick and mix

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