

MEET THE NEW CAST



I was free! For Piers Ford Grace Brothers wasn't a sitcom – it was real

AS SOMEONE WHOSE 1970s youth was haunted by the dreaded calls of "I'm free!" the morning after another episode of *Are You Being Served?*, I ought to be left cold by the news of a revival. Vintage TV has the knack of triggering conflicted nostalgia. The catchphrase made John Inman's Mr Humphries a national treasure, but it also gave the school-corridor wags an easy weapon to aim at a gay teenager.

In fact, a tribute in the form of a new episode also promises fresh liberation from the memory of those taunts. I spent a gap year working at Simpson in Piccadilly, the department store that inspired the programme – and it gave me a whole new perspective on the show.

Jeremy Lloyd worked there briefly in the 1950s – it left an indelible impression. Twenty years later, when he met producer David Croft, who was scouting for fresh sitcom ideas, he finally had the opportunity to turn that raw material into comedy gold. A writing partner-

ship was born and history was made, as Grace Brothers came to dominate prime-time viewing.

When I arrived at Simpson in 1980, *Are You Being Served?* was already much loved by the nation. The store was a quaint time capsule that offered a retail experience at odds with the rest of the high street. It had begun the slow, elegant decline that would eventually see it close its doors in 1999, after which the building reopened as the Waterstones flagship bookshop.

It was a world of shopping on account, where vulgar cash was exchanged via the Lamson tube system and sales had to be authorised by floor-walking sponsors like Captain Peacock.

I kept sentry duty on the staff door and from my perch, I watched the petty power struggles and empire building. I heard the rebellious rumbles of discontent. And I saw the zeal with which shop staff defended their territory. The TV scripts reflected that universe with ringing authenticity. The origins of the show's landmark characters were equally apparent. There were several Mrs Slocombes: fierce Boudiccas who

ran their sales floors with cold-eyed ruthlessness. Woe betide a Miss Brahm who overreached her ambition.

There were numerous Mr Humphries – adept at handling those tricky high-end customers, but ready with a stiletto-sharp barb once backs were turned – and randy Mr Lucases, forever changing their luck with a female counterpart. And there was an army of Mr Graingers, elderly sales staff who had been with the store since its 1930s heyday and now part of the building's fabric.

IT MIGHT BE a stretch to describe *Are You Being Served?* as social history, but these characters were rooted in a world that actually existed. A world which has long vanished, but gave me my first experience of work. Maybe that's why I still have a lingering affection for the show. When I find myself browsing for books in Piccadilly, I'll always be joined by a ghost or two. I hope the 2016 version will do them justice. It might even help to lay a few of them to rest.