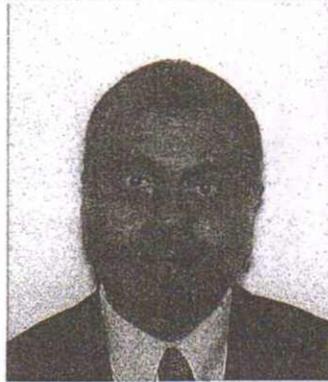


April 2004 was a sad time for Oxhey Village residents when our post office closed down and Vikash Modi, who had been our sub postmaster for the last 26 years, retired. He very kindly agreed to answer some questions about himself and his job.

Vikash came to Britain from Kenya as a boy and after gaining a computer degree at Birmingham he took part in a Business Opportunity Scheme and trained to become a sub postmaster. He moved to Oxhey Village with his wife and parents in 1978, where he lived over the premises for 18 months before moving to Silverdale Road in Bushey, where he now lives with his wife Bina who is an accountant, and their 2 children. Their son, Sachin is 21 and is studying medicine at University. Daughter Anuja is taking her A levels and hopes to study optometry.

When Vikash first started out in the Post Office it was a sound business opportunity. Vikash was self employed with a contract agreement with the PO. The PO paid a salary based on the business transacted, and then he had the side business – sweets, cards, stationery etc. which also flourished. The Post Office in Villiers Road, which was then double the size, was busy all the time, with residents calling in for pensions, child benefit, National Savings and National Savings Bank. Vikash recalled children coming in with their PO Savings Boxes to which only he had the key. He would then unlock the box, empty out their pennies, 5p and 10p and enter the amount in their savings book. He remembers the children coming in with their pocket money to buy sweets, sometimes in very small amounts, which he would place in a small paper bag for them to carry home. He recalled how people would be outside his Post Office well before 9am in the morning especially on Mondays and Thursdays (Benefit days) and they would be exchanging gossip, discussing topical events, the content of the morning papers, and their aches and pains while they were waiting for him to open up. He recalled a certain Ron Baker (a window cleaner) who used to stand on the steps from about 8am and people would gather round as if it was a public meeting.



Vik has seen children from being babies to grown ups. Many pensioners have also now passed away, and the relationship that was built with everyone will never be forgotten.

Then about 12-14 years ago things began to change not only in Oxhey but all over the country when paper-based work started to be transferred onto computers. In 2002 the PO and the Postmaster began to be concerned by the trend as the Government tried to reduce the expenses of issuing pensions, child allowance and other benefits by transferring them all by Automatic Credit Transfer. This reduced fraud as well as the printing costs of books and stationery. A government pilot scheme using a benefit card was trialed but it was not a success.

Then the Post Office also trialed a Card Account. By 2003 70% of all Child Allowance was paid by ACT and in April 2003 the government gave a choice to pensioners – they could carry on using the PO until they had bank accounts or they could join the PO Card Account. In 2006 the changeover to ACT will be complete.

Computerisation had a knock-on effect on other business. The Post Office was behind with modernisation and was losing a tremendous amount of business. Most utility bills were now paid by Automatic Credit Transfer and Direct Debit and the Giro business was thus reduced. Together with the advent of the internet and email this meant that the overall volume of business had reduced by 50%.

There are approximately 19,000 Post Offices in England. The Post Office had to reinvent its programme. The Government wanted it to keep the rural POs open for obvious reasons, but Oxhey Village PO is regarded as

an *urban* post office and there are others in reasonable proximity. Vikash was given the choice to carry on but there would be many changes and he would be signing a new contract, or he could opt to leave. He said he found this a very difficult decision to make and it took him 18 months of careful thought. He was totally committed to his job, even though the hours were long – 9am till 5.30pm with no time off for lunch and book-work well into the evening. Bina also helped after hours and after all day at her own job. The Post Office was his life, even on holiday he felt it was never far away. Nevertheless, he could see that under the new contract he would be working these long hours for less money as the PO business gradually dwindled due to modernisation and modern shopping patterns. However, he finally decided it was the right time in his life to make a change. His children were growing up and he and his wife wanted to have more time for each other. He has many hobbies, painting and drawing, stamp and coin collecting, as well as travel, and he wished to be free to enjoy these.

Finally after six weeks of consultation with the local community it was decided by Postwatch (the independent body that looks after public interests) that it was viable to close Oxhey Post Office as the other post office in the area was within half a mile reach, and therefore it would not be too much inconvenience to both young and elderly people to use this office.

He very much regrets that the Post Office is no longer a viable business for him as he took pride in the privilege of serving the public, and always tried to find time to listen to customers, learning about their lives, and giving advice when asked. If necessary he would ask them to see him after hours if there was a queue building up! He said: "I was brought up to show respect for other people and that in return they would respect you." He had full satisfaction in joining in their lives as well as serving them.

But the village was changing. He used to serve mainly elderly people but now there were a lot more first time buyers and young families in the village and their requirements were different. They could now travel by

car to shop all in one place. They could buy stamps and get cash back at the local supermarket. He could foresee a time when more and more of the PO facilities would become available at the supermarket or shopping mall as well as on the computer. It was time for him to move on.

Vikash said it had already made a difference to his life. He has found it very hard to adjust to an "easier" day, as he has always worked long hours and he confesses to being a workaholic. He does not intend to be a "couch potato", as he will be taking up a post in a bank "somewhere in Hertfordshire" but he intends to remain living in the area.

Vikash has always enjoyed being part of the village where he says everyone is so friendly and he was very touched by all the letters and cards he received from Oxhey residents when he retired. He assures us that he will keep in touch with all his friends and looks forward to being able to attend the Summer Fayre and the Picnic.



Thank you Vikash, for your invaluable long and faithful service to the Village. We wish you and your family every success and much happiness in your new life.