



Jess Gillam, 13, behind the counter in the old-fashioned specialist grocers section



Gillam's past and present: Doug, Shirley and Jess Gillam in front of their tearoom and shop, just across the road from the original shop, below, which closed down in 1994 after more than a century in business

## A taste of history

The name of Gillam has been synonymous with good food in Ulverston since the 1890s. Michaela Robinson-Tate meets Doug and Shirley Gillam, who run a tearoom and specialist grocer's shop across the road from where it all started

Photography by Phil Rigby



When John James Gillam opened a grocer's shop in Ulverston in 1892 he started a business that was to last for more than a century. The shop, on Market Street, became known for its excellent service and for its tea and coffee. During the Gillams' heyday they also ran a sweetshop two doors further up the street.

By the time Donald Gillam came to retire in 1994 there was nobody on his side of the family to take on the business and the shop was finally closed.

The Gillam name has since made a return to Market Street thanks to John James's great grandson Doug and his wife Shirley, who opened their traditional tearoom in 2006 in a building directly opposite the original grocer's shop and have

since won fans, awards and accolades.

Last November, the Gillam history came full circle when the couple started a specialist grocer's in the shop next door.

The shop produce and tearoom food is vegetarian and organic and most of their drinks are Fairtrade. These elements are important to the Gillams as is ensuring that what they serve is excellent. "We just trade on the quality," says Doug, 37. "People come because it's good and that's all that matters."

In the tearoom kitchen, Doug cooks and makes teacakes and Shirley bakes cakes and scones. On a busy day she can find herself making eight batches of the popular scones.

"Shirley's grandmother was a confectioner and



Doug and Shirley in the tearoom, which has a period look



taught her to bake," says Doug.

Their 16 staff serve sandwiches, toasted sandwiches and jacket potatoes. Dairy-free choices such as olive pâté with roasted vegetables are available.

A traditional soup, such as cream of broccoli, is offered alongside a more unusual choice, such as roasted pepper and sweet potato, to cater to a range of customers.

On the day *Cumbria Life* visits, the specials board includes a red onion cheese and rosemary jelly toasted sandwich. The cheese is from Leagram Dairies of Chipping in Lancashire and is made especially for them.

Their mushrooms on toast – which Doug describes as hearty comfort food – is a particular favourite of The Hairy Biker and *Cumbria Life* columnist Dave Myers.

"It's simple but really, really nice," says Doug. "That's made with butter from Shap (Winter Tarn Organic Farm), cream from Swarthmoor from South Lakes Organic Dairy and bread from Grange Bakery.

"The quality ingredients make all the difference as well as using mushrooms that are decent quality, chestnut mushrooms."

In addition to Shirley's scones, their Cumberland tea-bread is popular as are the teacakes which Doug learned how to bake from Bev Laws, his friend's father and retired baker from Greenodd.

The specialist grocer's shop has old-fashioned shelving where Kilner jars are lined up, full of classic



'People come in the shop and think it's always been here with the old till and the Victorian counter'

sweets such as bon bons and rhubarb and custards.

There is a selection of cheese, including Eden Valley Organic Brie from Appleby Creamery; bowls of glossy olives; grocery products such as couscous; sweets and gifts including fudge and mint cake; fruit and vegetables; artisan bread from Grange Bakery and eggs in a basket on the counter. Doug says it's important to them to support local producers.

The original Gillam's was celebrated for its specialist knowledge of tea and coffee.

Doug says: "We get a lot of people who say they remember the smell of the coffee grinding and the service they used to get."

Doug and Shirley have continued that tradition with an extensive range of coffees and loose leaf tea. They blend a number of their own teas, including the house blend, which is described as a robust, invigorating English breakfast tea.

Their hard work has led to an award from The Tea Guild.

Doug says: "Getting an award of excellence from The Tea Guild is a major achievement and recognition of the effort we've put into researching and sourcing top quality teas and serving them in the correct way."

The shop also has a range of gifts such as mugs, teapots, tea sets and bags which Doug and Shirley choose together.

After buying the tearoom building in 2005, they set about giving it a period look, fitting sliding sash windows and putting on a new, vintage-style shop front.

Inside Doug and Shirley have created a period atmosphere by using items from the original shop along with antique finds of their own.

Customers recognise a coffee grinder that dates from the Fifties while a traditional set of weighing scales, which is in the grocer's shop, is said to be the same one used to weigh out sweets for Stan Laurel, who was born in Ulverston in 1890 and spent his first few years in the town.

They've decorated the walls with framed black and white photographs and newspaper cuttings about the original Gillam business, have sourced coloured glass light fittings and collected old objects, such as glass bottles dug up from the garden.

Doug says: "People come in the shop and think it's always been here with the old till and the Victorian counter."

Doug and Shirley, who have two daughters, eight-year-old Patsy and Jess, 13, who works in the business during the holidays, were in the process of selling their house when they saw the Market Street premises for sale.

Doug's grandfather, Alfred Gillam, had worked in the original grocer's shop for 13 years and when it closed, it was being run by Donald Gillam, a cousin of Doug's grandfather, and his wife Jean.

After Doug and Shirley decided to start their business they went to tell Donald about their plans.

"He gave us his blessing," says Doug. "He died before we finished the renovations, which is sad; he didn't get to see it."

At the time they bought the business, Doug was



working as a freelance percussion teacher in schools and for the likes of the Barracudas carnival band from Barrow-in-Furness. He still does percussion work when he has time and plays in a band called One Thousand. He had also worked in hotels and restaurants.

Shirley was running a horticultural project and had worked in cafés when she was younger.

Doug says that receiving awards is a tangible sign that they're doing things well. They've twice been shortlisted for the Cumbria Tourism Awards taste of Cumbria prize and are regularly mentioned in top tearoom lists in the national press.

Doug says people in town seem pleased that the Gillam name is involved in Ulverston's food scene again and that the business is evocative of the original shop.

He says: "When they come in people feel like they're leaving the modern world and stresses behind and they can just re-charge." Life

■ Gillam's Tearoom, 64 Market Street, Ulverston, LA12 7LT. Tel: 01229 587564 or see ~ [www.gillams-tearoom.co.uk](http://www.gillams-tearoom.co.uk).

Top: the tearoom, which is decorated with memorabilia from the original shop; left: Doug in the well-stocked grocer's section; below: the famous mushrooms on toast, made with chestnut mushrooms, butter from Shap, cream from Swarthmoor and bread from Grange Bakery

