



Queen of shoplifters goes to ground with fame in the bag and a fitting epitaph in flowers

Report: Duncan Campbell □ Main photograph: Graham Turner

THERE was a Royal funeral in the capital yesterday. The woman who won a reputation as the Queen of the shoplifters, Shirley Pitts, was buried with great style after the sort of life that was as much Dickens as Dickens and Jones.

Fifteen Daimlers, each as black as a Marlborough Street magistrate's expression, led the funeral procession more than 20 miles from her home in Chigwell, Essex, to the Lambeth cemetery in south London, where a trumpeter and guitarist in velvet bow ties played the "Heaven, I'm in heaven..." lines from Irving Berlin's *Cheek to Cheek*, as the body was lowered into the grave.

Born on the Lambeth Walk, in south London, 57 years ago and evacuated to Yorkshire during the war, Shirley Pitts started thieving at the age of seven. By the time she was in her twenties, she had won a



Fifteen Daimlers escorted Shirley Pitts (above), scourge of the top shops, to her last resting place in Lambeth cemetery yesterday, accompanied in style by trumpet and guitar and condolences from the Krays

reputation for being one of the most skilful and enterprising shoplifters in the land.

The handsome Ms Pitts would operate teams of "hoisters", who travelled the land pursuing their trade. Harrods was a favourite shop, a fact recalled yesterday by an elegantly designed floral Harrods carrier bag and a large bunch of lilies still in their Harrods wrapping. Fashionable to the end, she was buried in a blue

£5,000 Zandra Rhodes creation. She did not always escape the attentions of the shopwalkers and she had three spells in prison. She was one of the few women to escape from a British jail, slipping out of Holloway when pregnant with one of her seven children.

Something of a pioneer, she was carrying out "shopping expeditions" all over the continent long before Ted Heath was urging active British participa-

tion in Europe. "She would go with teams to Geneva and Paris," said her son Christopher, an architect, yesterday.

She contracted cancer in the last years of her life and had started to dictate her life story, with the help of Lorraine Gorman, writer and friend.

After a blessing at the Roman Catholic Church of the Assumption in Chigwell, where the priest asked for God's "merciful judgment" and her son Harry

extolled his mother's courage — "she was more of a man than most men," he said — the procession of extended family and friends moved on to Hoxton.

Her late partner, Chris Hawkins, whose name she was to take, had run a fruit and veg stall in Hoxton market. "She met him at a time when South London girls went out with East London fellas," explained Christopher.

In Kingsland Road, Hackney,

the long arm of the law that had once reached out to tap her shoulder at the exit of a West End store, now stretched out to halt traffic as the limousines and Volvo estates sped through London.

Her final resting place was near her brother, Henry "Adgie" Pitts, the bank robber, who died in a car smash at the age of 29. She had disowned another brother, Charlie, who took part in a botched and violent kid-

napping for a £50,000 ransom in the early 1980s.

The Kray twins sent their condolences, and Buster Edwards, the Great Train Robber, was there in person, as were her family and friends who were anxious that she be remembered as much for her generosity and loyalty to friends as for her activities near the perfume counters.

Her reputation for never "grassing", a tribute as fine as

any of the confections of carnations and fuscias, was recalled at the graveside, as was her love of a good time, commemorated with a champagne bottle made of flowers. Two words in 2ft-high floral letters spelled out her epitaph: "Gone Shopping."

