

The village shop, 1660-1760: innovation and tradition

Introduction

In 1681, an anonymous pamphleteer opined that:

now in every country village, where is ... not above ten houses, there is a shopkeeper, and one that never served any apprenticeship to any shopkeeping trade whatsoever. And many of those ... deal in as many substantial commodities as any that live in cities and market towns, and who have no less than a thousand pounds worth of goods in their shops, for which they pay not one farthing of any tax at all. ... If the cities and market towns be depopulated for want of trade then what will the country man do to have money for all his Commodities, as his butter, his cheese, his cattle, his wool, his corn and his fruit? ... It is manifest that the people living in cities and market towns consume all these commodities of the farmers and do help them to ready money for the same¹

For him, village shops were both an established and deeply problematic part of the English rural economy – one that undermined the traditional roles of town and country. Establishing the veracity of such claims is no easy matter. Most research on rural trading has centred on the markets and fairs which formed the principal means of selling the crops and livestock produced from the land. B.H. Holderness and John Martin have provided a reasonable picture of the growing number of village shops, the latter demonstrating that traders and craftsmen accounted for anything up to half of households in Warwickshire by the late eighteenth century.² However, we still lack a clear idea of the character and practices of these shops, or even the range or composition of their stock. They were overlooked by Joan Thirsk in her pioneering analysis of changing supply and demand in the early-modern period, falling down the gaps between the urban retailer and the hawker with his pack.³ Writing a decade later, Carole Shammas argued that the so-called new groceries, introduced to England in the middle decades of the seventeenth century, were crucial in allowing small retailers to build sales and generate more rapid and reliable turnover; but her ‘country retailers’ were, in reality, small town shopkeepers.⁴ Much of the rest of the burgeoning literature on seventeenth and especially eighteenth-century retailing centres on the bright lights of London or the somewhat less dazzling, but still well-lit shops of provincial towns. In contrast, the village shop remains obscure. Successively

¹ N.H. The Compleat Tradesman (London, 1684), p.26.

² B.A. Holderness, ‘Rural tradesmen 1660-1850: a regional study in Lindsey’, *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology*, 7 (1972), pp.77-81; J. Martin, ‘Village traders and the emergence of a proletariat in south Warwickshire, 1750-1851’, *Agricultural History Review*, 32 (1984), pp.179-88.

³ J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects. The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978), esp. pp.122-3.

⁴ C. Shammas, *The Pre-industrial Consumer in England and America* (Oxford, 1990), pp.226-9

lambasted for stealing the trade of tax-paying urban tradesmen and sucking the poor into debt and dependency or lamented as a vanishing symbol of an idealised rural society, its doors have remained largely closed to retail and rural historians alike.⁵ This ignorance is all the more remarkable given the breadth and depth of changes in consumption during this period; changes which historians from Joan Thirsk to Lorna Weatherill have strongly associated with processes of production and especially supply.⁶ If access to goods was so important in determining consumption practices, then we surely need to know much more about the points of supply, both in town and country. This would tell us not just more about rural shopping and rural consumption, it would also shed light on the broader nature of rural-urban relationships in the early-modern period.

Filling this lacuna is a major task and well beyond the scope of this paper. However, by drawing on a study of village shops in Cheshire between 1660 and 1760, I want to begin exploring the distribution, form and character of village shops, and to assess the extent to which we might view them as an innovation within the rural economy. In particular, I want to address, albeit very briefly, four key areas: first, the geography of rural retailing and how this related to the distribution of population; second, the types and mix of goods available, and particularly the presence of novel and exotic goods; third, the ways in which the shopkeeper engaged with their customers, and, finally, the place of the shop and shopkeeper in the rural community, as bastions of rural society or outposts of urban economy.

Village shops: growth, distribution and stock

Evidence from probate records, whilst spread somewhat thinly, can be used to trace the growth and distribution of rural retailing in early-modern Cheshire. The data clearly show both a growing number and widening distribution of rural shops and services (Table 1). Taking a broad definition of rural retailing, to include those providing services such as physicians and barbers, numbers nearly doubled during this hundred-year period. More narrowly defined as mercers, drapers, ironmongers, grocers and shopkeepers (that is, those retailers most likely to be selling novel or imported items), numbers rose even more sharply: from 11 to 16 to 25. Such growth is all the more striking when compared with stability in the number of urban retailers falling into these categories (from 84 to 93 to 92). Although these figures undoubtedly mask a shift in urban retailing to more overtly specialist occupations (including hardwareman, earthenware dealer and tobacconist) the clear implication is that growing rural demand was being met, at least in part, by expanding rural provision.

⁵ For analysis of changing perceptions of the village shop, see L. Bailey, 'The Village Shop and Rural Life in Victorian England: Cultural representations and lived experience', unpublished PhD thesis (Northampton, 2015).

⁶ Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*, pp.106-32; L. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1600-1760* (London, 1988), especially pp.43-69.

Table 1. Rural retailers in Cheshire, 1660-1760

	1660-1693	1694-1726	1727-1760	total
mercers and drapers	4	8	9	21
grocers	1	5	9	15
ironmongers and shopkeepers	6	3	7	16
chapmen, merchants and chandlers	23	20	23	66
butchers and cheese factors	15	23	36	74
physicians, surgeons, barbers and attorneys	7	12	14	33
total	56	71	98	225

Source: probate records proved at Chester 1660-1760

As might be expected, the distribution of rural retailing was far from uniform. Early expansion had focused provision in the centre and east of the county, where chapmen were especially numerous and where the concentrations of rural craftsmen, such as tailors and shoemakers, were also greatest.⁷ By the early eighteenth century, coverage had become far more even – a process which continued into the succeeding decades – although the Wirral remained relatively poorly served. Again, if we focus on what we might term ‘specialist’ retailers, then a relatively even distribution is evident, the 47 shopkeepers being spread across 29 villages, from Northenden Etchells near Stockport to Upton on the Wirral. The obvious explanation for this growing and spreading provision comes in terms of increased demand, fuelled through population growth and, as de Vries argues in his *industrious revolution* thesis, by increasing market-orientation of consumer demand.⁸ However, the relationship was by no means straightforward: between the late seventeenth and mid eighteenth centuries, the number of retailers grew by nearly three-quarters whereas population growth was probably nearer one-third. Moreover, whilst population grew most rapidly in the industrialising parishes in the north east of the county, retail provision appears to have weakened there, at least in relative terms. This may reflect the nature of demand: butchers as well as tailors and shoemakers were most numerous and were increasing in number in these areas, serving the demand for a growing and increasingly specialised workforce of rural manufacturers in the manner theorised by de Vries. To judge from retail provision, however, their requirements remained relatively simple, being principally focused on the basic needs for food and clothing. Mercers, grocers and the like were more prevalent in the richer agricultural areas in the centre of the county where rents and probably spending power were higher. Surplus income here

⁷ J. Stobart, ‘The economic and social worlds of rural craftsmen-retailers in eighteenth-century Cheshire’, *Agricultural History Review*, 52:2 (2004), pp.145-6.

⁸ J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution. Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008), pp.122-86.

appears to have been more closely linked with the growing range of consumer goods highlighted by Thirsk and others.⁹

We need to be careful here, of course. Differences in the level of provision were not pronounced, and it is dangerous to infer demand (and consumption) from the number of retailers. On the one hand, villagers could also travel into local or more distant towns to acquire goods; on the other, there is good evidence that many consumer goods were bought from itinerant hawkers. We know from the diary of Nicholas Blundell that even the gentry bought from such traders, and that they purchased not just mundane goods, but also items such as calicoes and bone-handled knives.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the undoubted importance of these alternative routes of supply and their undoubted under-representation in the probate records, the number and density of rural shops in early-modern Cheshire is striking. Nowhere was more than five miles or so from the type of fixed shop which might reasonably be expected to carry a range of consumer items and to some extent open up a world of goods to rural consumers. Moreover, they were not restricted to larger villages or parish centres. The latter accounted for about three-fifths of village shops, with substantial settlements such as Bunbury, Tarporley and Great Neston each housing several retailers who, to judge from the dates of their deaths, were trading at the same time. These were places not much smaller than some towns: Tarporley had a population about 300 in the later seventeenth century, compared with 360 in Frodsham and 500 in Malpas. However, there were also retailers in some surprisingly small villages: Mary Eaven of Newhall (d.1681), John Robinson of Oxton (d.1715) and John Starkey of Cogshall (d.1741) all kept shop in places comprising just a handful of houses and perhaps 100 people. They must surely have drawn customers from neighbouring settlements in order to make their businesses viable, suggesting that, not only were consumer goods locally available by the early eighteenth century, but also that village shops served a population beyond their immediate environs.

As noted above, rising rural demand was linked with a growing ability and inclination to spend on an expanding range of necessary and not-so-necessary items. Even a cursory glance through the probate inventories of rural dwellers reveals the widespread ownership of novel items by the early decades of the eighteenth century. The tailor, Humphrey Walmsley (d.1730), was typical of many respectable village craftsmen. Alongside a range of traditional items, he had an oval table, a looking glass, whiteware, and a mustard pot and cruet in his houseplace; a further looking glass in his parlour (used as a bed chamber), and another looking glass, plus four pictures, two window curtains, and a range of

⁹ Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*; W. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (London, 2002); M. Overton, et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004).

¹⁰ See, for example, F. Tyrer (ed.), 'The Great Diurnal of Nicholas Blundell of Little Crosby, Lancashire', *Record Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, 114 (1972), 2 March 1726.

table linen in an upstairs room.¹¹ These are exactly the kinds of things that Weatherill marks as becoming increasingly common in rural as well as urban homes, but the frequent and easy assumption is that these consumer goods were accessed via towns. Of course, urban shops were an important source for such goods, numerous studies revealing the cornucopia and sophistication of these as sites of consumption.¹² However, a close reading of the contents of rural retailers' inventories reveals that a wide range of consumer items was also available from village shops.

From his shop in Great Budworth, the mercer Thomas Johnson (d. 1686) sold kersey, serge, druggit, linsey, shag, camblet, calico, Scotch cloth, Irish linen, flannel and silk. He also had buttons, tapes, thread and stockings; sealing wax, gunpowder, shot, soap and starch; grammars, primers and psalters; a range of spices and seeds; dried fruits, rice and two types of sugar. Similarly, the Tarporley ironmonger Ralph Edge (d. 1683) had 15 types of cloth; haberdashery, woollen caps, gloves and stockings; thimbles, pin cushions, tobacco boxes, ink horns, manacles and spectacles; ironware including pins, knives, knitting needles and curtain rings; primers, psalters, testaments and bibles; shot, candles and soap, turpentine and oil; dried fruit, seed and spices; tobacco and tobacco pipes.¹³ These shops must have been like Aladdin's cave: one can imagine the shelves recorded in Johnson's shop groaning under dozens of bolts of cloth, or Edge's counters and display boards draped with cloth, ribbon or trinkets. From our twenty-first century perspective, it is easy to forget the impact that such an array of goods must have had on the men and women who patronised these shops. They gave a glimpse of luxury, a taste of the exotic and a feel for some of the finer things in life.

Three things are particularly striking about these shops. First is the immense range of goods available to rural consumers on their doorstep, not just in nearby towns. Silks, spices and calicoes from the orient, tobacco and sugar from the West Indies, dried fruit from the Mediterranean, book from London, metalwares from the west Midlands and cloth from across the country. It is difficult to gauge the impact that the ready availability of such goods might have had on consumption, but village shops as well as their urban counterparts had considerable potential in promoting new consumption practices in the countryside. Certainly, we should not overlook the importance of familiarity and convenience in structuring demand. Second is the lack of specialisation amongst rural shopkeepers. This might be seen as an inevitable consequence of the comparatively small number of potential customers on which they might draw. Johnson, for example, could not rely solely on infrequent sales of cloth, but had to supplement his income with more regular sales of groceries. Whilst such arguments are seductive in their economic logic, it is clear that many urban retailers in the early modern period were similarly catholic in the stock which they sold. Zachariah Shelley (d. 1728), a mercer from Congleton, had a

¹¹ Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALs), WS1730, Humphrey Walmsley.

¹² For good overviews, see: N. Cox, *The Complete Tradesman. A Study of Retailing, 1550-1820* (Aldershot, 2000); I. Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700-1850* (Farnham, 2014).

¹³ CALs, WS1686, Thomas Johnson; WS1683, Ralph Edge.

wide range of cloth, haberdashery and groceries, whilst the inventory of another mercer, Isaac Newton of Northwich (d. 1726), itemised drapery ware, mercery ware, haberdashery and millinery, along with a variety of groceries.¹⁴ Conversely, some village tradesmen were surprisingly specialised. The mercer Richard Smith (d. 1716) had £88 2s 8d of cloth in his Bunbury shop, including buckram, stuff, shalloon, frize, camblet, serge, broad cloth, poplin, dimity, druggit, fustian, check and linen. Besides an extensive range of buttons and small quantities of thread and tape, the only other goods available were a handful of ivory combs, 24 pairs of stockings and 5 quires of white paper. Yet he was clearly able to make a living from this relatively specialised stock, supplying over 400 credit customers drawn from the village and surrounding countryside. Third is the sheer quantity of goods stocked by these village shopkeepers. This allowed them to offer a wide range of choice within as well as between product types. As we have seen, Richard Smith, Ralph Edge and Thomas Johnson each offered around a dozen different types of cloth, as did Thomas Kent (d. 1752), a mercer from Holmes Chapel.¹⁵ And there was often choice in colour and pattern, as well as type of cloth: grey, black, white, blue, green and red woollens, stripes and checks, and printed calicoes were all available from these village shops. Choice was not restricted to cloth: Edge stocked five different types of cap, four sorts of pepper, and four grades of tobacco.

What is missing from these lists of stock, however, are the new groceries which Shammass sees as underpinning an expansion in retailing, especially beyond the principal urban streets. Tobacco is found and so too is sugar; but tea, coffee and chocolate are missing. Does this suggest a lack of dynamism amongst village shopkeepers; an unwillingness to stock new types of consumer items? Or is it a reflection of the limited market for these goods amongst villagers in the early decades of the eighteenth century? Inventory evidence is equivocal. Some rural households had the equipage to prepare and serve these drinks: Roger Heald, a chapman from Poynton (d.1719), for instance, owned a copper tea kettle and a tea table, and John Ward (d.1715), the rector of Tarporley, had a copper coffee pot, half a dozen silver tea spoons, various pieces of chinaware and no less than four tea tables.¹⁶ However, many other households were apparently without even a kettle. This would not preclude the consumption of hot drinks, but it does suggest that they were not yet an established part of the diet or material culture of most villagers. Supply might thus have been suppressed by limited demand. Indeed, a more general survey indicates that it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that tea, coffee

¹⁴ CALS, WS1728, Zachariah Shelley; WS1726, Isaac Newton. The actual stock held by urban shops is a surprisingly neglected area. The seminal case study remains T. Willan, *An Eighteenth-Century Shopkeeper: Abram Dent of Kirby Stephen* (Manchester, 1970). For analysis of the changing stock of grocers, see J. Stobart, *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830* (Oxford, 2013), pp.41-64.

¹⁵ CALS, WS1716, Richard Smith; WS1752, Thomas Kent.

¹⁶ CALS, WS1719 Roger Heald; WS1715 John Ward. See also Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, pp.75-9.

and chocolate became mainstays of the grocer's stock.¹⁷ By the 1770s, however, Samuel Finney noted that the industrial workers around Wilmslow were spending much of their disposable income on tea, coffee and sugar (as well as printed cottons, silk waistcoats and laced caps), which they acquired from the retailers in the neighbourhood; people like William Wood, most of whose customers bought tea on a regular basis.¹⁸

It seems, then, that the so-called new groceries were not a central part of the rural shopkeeper's business during much of this period. They relied more on traditional lines and, indeed traditional modes of selling. Along with their urban counterparts, they invested in a growing range of counters, shelves and nests of drawers which, by the second quarter of the eighteenth century, formed the standard shop fittings with the counter well-established as the focus for exchange of goods. In this respect, there was little to distinguish rural and urban shops, although the scale and quality of fittings was often greater in towns.¹⁹ Selling techniques also had much in common. There was undoubtedly a mix of cash and credit transactions, the latter leaving a much fuller record in the shape of account books which show both the large number of credit customers and the varied arrangements made to manage credit. In spite of the growing rhetoric condemning village shopkeepers for ensnaring the rural poor in a mounting spiral of debt,²⁰ the evidence suggests that rural as well as urban shopkeepers attempted to match credit arrangements to the customer's ability to and history of repayment. The practices of William Wood, who had a small shop in Didsbury from which he sold a range of goods, mostly groceries, provide a good example here.²¹ Most of his customers were allowed to build up a certain level of debt in the account book, so long as they made regular payments to service or clear their debt. If customers failed to service their debts, Wood appears to have limited their credit. The account run by James Cash illustrates these points clearly enough. He had accumulated a debt of £3 2s 1½d when Wood drew up his account on 12 February 1787. He paid £1 1s of this and continued to buy on credit over the next month, purchasing over £1 worth of goods and raising his total bill to £3 4s 10½d by 13 March. No payment was made against this bill and for the next two months spending was limited to a total of just 12s 1¼d – about one quarter of the previous level. On 15 May, he paid £2 12s 6d and from June returned to the earlier pattern of spending and payments.²² Yet these 'modern' practices of credit management were tempered by tradition. Wood also accepted payments in kind,

¹⁷ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, p.52.

¹⁸ See T.S. Ashton, *An Economic History of England: the 18th Century* (London, 1955), pp.214-16; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, p.202.

¹⁹ A. Hann and J. Stobart, 'Sites of consumption: the display of goods in provincial shops in eighteenth-century England', *Cultural and Social History*, 2 (2005), pp.165-87.

²⁰ See Bailey, 'Village Shop and Rural Life', chapter 1.

²¹ Manchester Central Library, MS F942, Customer Ledger of William Wood of Didsbury, 1786-91.

²² Fuller discussion of these arrangements can be found in Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 154-5; H.-C. Mui and L. Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England*, 215-17.

with some customers paying off part of their accounts by spreading molehills, working in Wood's garden, mowing in his fields or mending shoes. In this, he was not unusual, of course: the Kirby Stephen shopkeeper Abraham Dent accepted similar payments in kind.²³

Village shops and village life

The transactions recorded in Wood's ledger reflect the frequent and seemingly ad hoc shopping practices of many of his customers. If we examine the frequency with which different goods were purchased, we see flour, bread, treacle, sugar, tea and candles were generally bought in small quantities and on a weekly or even daily basis. Soap and sand were also regular purchases, as were salt and cheese; but they were rather less frequent, appearing in most accounts between two and four times each month. This suggests that Wood's customers were buying goods as and when they needed them. However, the frequency of visits made by some customers suggests that other motivations were also at play. Martha Chase went to Wood's shop on 3 January 1787 and bought one pound of treacle; she returned later that day for currants and a clove pepper. On the following day she bought treacle, flour and barm; the next day she had a manchet loaf, and the day after a further loaf, tea and sugar. On 7 January, Martha bought sugar, coffee and bread valued at 8d, and two days later she had treacle and sugar for 7d. This frequent, almost chaotic pattern of purchasing was not unusual and reflected the very local nature of the customer base for many village shops, but how do we best understand Martha's behaviour? It was categorically not a reflection of hand-to-mouth existence: that she was not returning to the shop with this frequency because she could afford only small quantities is manifest from her use of an account with Wood. To an extent, it reflected a particular mind-set that favoured frequent purchasing over storage of goods at home; in all probability, it was also a product of the sociability of the shop. We know from Thomas Turner's diary that his Sussex shop – in reality little more than a room in his cottage – was a place where women in particular gathered to drink tea and pass the time with friends. These were practices which both made Turner's days pass more pleasantly and gave him anxiety as he reflected on time idled away.²⁴ Wood's customers probably used his shop in a similar way, a habit made more enticing perhaps by the fact that he appears to have been running an alehouse from the same or neighbouring premises.

These practices suggest that the village shop lay at the heart of the rural community. They were places of informal sociability, for gossiping and for passing the time – a picture which chimes with our modern conception of the shop as an integral part of the village and a touchstone of its economic and social well-being. However, it is clear that a growing number of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century commentators saw it as an unwelcome intrusion: it represented urban values (through the

²³ Willan, *Eighteenth-Century Shopkeeper*, pp.24-5.

²⁴ D. Vaisey (ed.) *The Diary of Thomas Turner, 1754-1765* (Oxford, 1984), *passim*.

goods being offered for sale and the ‘modern’ commercial practices deployed) and was an unsightly blot on a picturesque rural scene. Repton, for example, neatly expunged the village shop, along with the beggar, from his ‘improved’ picture of the rural garden.²⁵ To what extent can these rival images be reconciled?

Table 2. Residence of executors of Cheshire rural retailers, 1660-1760

	same village		neighbouring village		town		other		unknown	
	kin n=134	other n=47	kin n=31	other n=59	kin n=21	other n=69	kin n=2	other n=7	kin n=207	other n=208
mercers and drapers	30.2	20.9	4.7	23.3	4.7	14.0	0.0	0.0	2.3	0.0
grocers and cheese factors	27.5	10.1	2.9	20.3	7.2	27.5	0.0	1.4	1.4	1.4
chapmen and merchants	29.9	7.7	6.8	9.4	6.8	17.1	0.9	5.1	8.5	7.7
professionals	24.5	5.7	13.2	7.5	5.7	26.4	1.9	0.0	5.7	9.4
chandlers and ironmongers	54.2	8.3	16.7	8.3	4.2	4.2	0.0	0.0	0.0	4.2
shopkeepers	16.7	16.7	22.2	22.2	0.0	11.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	11.1
butchers	41.8	15.4	4.4	15.4	2.2	7.7	0.0	0.0	4.4	8.8
total	32.3	11.3	7.5	14.2	5.1	16.6	0.5	1.7	4.6	6.3

Source: probate records proved at Chester 1660-1760

Note: shopkeepers here are broadly defined (see Table 1)

I have argued elsewhere that we can use the executors nominated in wills as a proxy for friendship networks.²⁶ Any simplistic correlation of the two is clearly problematic, yet these strong bonds can indicate a set of people with whom the individual testator had particularly close connections. What they show is that, taking my broader definition, village shopkeepers had a predominantly local social horizon, nearly half of all executors being drawn from the same village as the testator (Table 2). This reflected the tendency to appoint immediate family, and especially wives, as executors; but in many ways this serves to underline the essentially local world of many rural shopkeepers. Certainly, these figures stand in marked contrast to those for townsmen in north-west England as a whole. For these people, immediate family accounted for barely one-third of executorial linkages and contacts were fairly evenly split between other towns and rural areas.²⁷ However, if village shopkeepers were different from their urban counterparts, there were a number of things that also distinguished them

²⁵ See N. Cox and K. Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2007), pp.29-48.

²⁶ Stobart, ‘Economic and social worlds’, pp.153-8.

²⁷ J. Stobart, ‘Social and geographical contexts of property transmission in the eighteenth century’, in J. Stobart and A. Owens (eds), *Urban Fortunes. Property and Inheritance in the Town, 1700-1900* (Aldershot, 2000), pp.113-22.

from their rural neighbours. First, around one in five of their executorial links were with townspeople, a figure which easily exceeds the urban connections of rural craftsmen, who had predominantly local executorial links. Moreover, most of these connections were with people unrelated to the deceased shopkeeper, suggesting that the link represented an active social or economic relationship between them. In short, shopkeepers appear to have had much stronger links with towns than did their rural neighbours.

Table 3. Ownership of livestock and crops by Cheshire shopkeepers and butchers, 1660-1760

	shopkeepers (n=16)		butchers (n=27)	
	number	percentage	number	percentage
cattle	7	43.8	20	74.1
sheep	0	0.0	8	29.6
pigs	2	12.5	14	51.9
poultry	1	6.3	5	18.5
corn & hay	6	37.5	16	59.3
husbandry ware	2	12.5	8	29.6
none	9	56.3	0	0.0

Source: probate records proved at Chester 1660-1760

Note: shopkeepers here are narrowly defined as mercer, drapers, ironmongers, grocers and shopkeepers.

Second, shopkeepers, when narrowly defined, exhibited limited engagement with agriculture. Unsurprisingly, ownership of livestock and/or husbandry ware was ubiquitous amongst village butchers: nearly three quarters had cattle and over half had corn and hay, and pigs (Table 3). In a very direct way, this reflected their business and specifically the practice of keeping and often fattening livestock locally before slaughter, butchering and sale, either via a stall at the urban market or some kind of shop in the village itself. However, the majority of rural tailors and shoemakers also owned livestock or grew crops, possessions which, on average, accounted for two-fifths of their inventoried wealth.²⁸ In contrast, well under half the mercers, drapers, grocers and ironmongers owned cattle, and a significantly larger proportion had no livestock at all. Agricultural by-employment was clearly not central to the livelihoods of these established shopkeepers to nearly the same extent as it was for butchers, or tailors and shoemakers; they were, in that sense, more detached from the rural-agricultural economy. Third, and underscoring this limited engagement with agriculture, is the occupational profile of executors (Table 4). Both craftsmen and shopkeepers drew heavily on individuals from related trades, a reliance which might reflect both family and friendship bonds, but which also made good sense in terms of engaging people with the knowledge needed to manage affairs post mortem. Where

²⁸ Stobart, 'Economic and social worlds', pp.151-3; J. Stobart, 'Food retailers and rural communities: Cheshire butchers in the long eighteenth century', *Local Population Studies*, 77 (2007), pp. 23-37.

shopkeepers differed was in terms of their lower reliance on farmers, who comprised less than one third of executors appointed, and apparently stronger links to the gentry – the latter perhaps reflecting a higher social standing within the community.

Table 4. Occupations of executors of Cheshire rural retailers, 1660-1760

	tailors and shoemakers (n=83)		shopkeepers (n=49)	
	number	% of known	number	% of known
agriculture	37	44.0	18	30.5
crafts	33	39.3	6	10.2
retail	7	8.3	20	33.9
gentry	2	2.4	9	15.3
other	5	6.0	6	10.2
unknown	86		50	

Source: probate records proved at Chester 1660-1760

Note: shopkeepers here are narrowly defined as mercer, drapers, ironmongers, grocers and shopkeepers.

Overall, the evidence of economic activity and social links conveys an impression of village shopkeepers as a distinctive, though no doubt integrated, section of the village community. They were more closely tied with other retailers, often outside the village, than with their farming neighbours. The nature of the relationship with other shopkeepers, especially those in towns, is perhaps clearest on those administration bonds which identify an individual as the principal creditor of the deceased. The creditors of rural shoemakers were mostly yeoman or occasionally gentlemen from the same or neighbouring villages who may have been supplying capital, livestock or leather.²⁹ With shopkeepers, creditors were generally urban tradesmen who were most likely distributing goods to their rural counterparts, in effect acting as wholesalers. The role of urban tradesmen in the supply of goods to village shops was well established in the early-modern period. Newspaper advertisements and trade cards often made mention of special rates for ‘country dealers’; whilst diaries such as that of Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield detail the supply relationship between the journeyman in the village shop and his master in town (in Lowe’s case, Leigh).³⁰

Amongst the Cheshire shopkeepers, the Mobberley grocer Joseph Strethill (d. 1721) appears to have drawn goods from Liverpool, his administration bond being signed by one Thomas Blease, a tobacconist from that town. Still more telling is the case of Joseph Pemberton of Upton on the Wirral. When he died in 1717, letters of administration were taken out by two merchants, Peter Faulkner of Liverpool and James Burrows of Chester. Two things are significant here. The first is that both men

²⁹ Stobart, ‘Economic and social worlds’, pp.152-3.

³⁰ See: Willan, *Eighteenth-Century Shopkeeper*; W. Sasche (ed.), *The Diary of Roger Lowe of Ashton in Makerfield* (London, 1938).

were identified as creditors, suggesting that Pemberton was drawing goods from at least two different sources. The second is that these men were merchants: Pemberton thus seems to have been sourcing his goods directly, rather than using an urban shopkeeper as an intermediary.³¹ Both point to a rather different arrangement from the locked-in dependence that characterised Roger Lowe's relationship with his urban master when running his small shop in rural Lancashire. There was a clear reliance on urban tradesmen for supplies, but also a degree of independence and choice. Indeed, our assumptions about the power relations between urban and rural tradesmen are challenged by the organisation of Edward Massey's business.³² Massey (d.1661) was a mercer from Great Budworth, who ran two shops: one in his village and one in the nearby town of Northwich. The poor condition of his probate inventory makes systematic analysis impossible, but it seems that the two shops were broadly equal in terms of their stock value (around £70 in each). Whilst the Northwich shop had a narrow range of goods (mostly woollen cloth), the one in Great Budworth contained cloth, haberdashery and a wide range of groceries. It is unlikely that Massey could have run both shops himself, and almost certainly employed an apprentice to look after one of them. Given that he was clearly resident in Great Budworth, it seems probable that he took charge of the village shop, suggesting that he saw this as the more important of the two.

Conclusions

I began with a series of questions. What was the geography of rural retailing? What sorts of goods were available in rural shops? How were goods bought and sold? And to what extent were rural shopkeepers linked to and influenced by their urban counterparts? Definite answers to many of these questions remain illusive, but this paper has, at least, begun to consider the spread, role and importance of the village shop; the extent to which shopkeepers engaged in 'modern' forms of selling, and the relationship between rural and urban retailing in the early modern period. Evidence from probate records points to significant growth in the number and an increasingly even distribution of rural shops. This reflects rural population growth, but also implies, as de Vries argues, that villagers as well as townspeople were ever more reliant on the market for access to a growing range of goods. Moreover, these goods, including imported foodstuffs as well as durable goods produced elsewhere in the country, were available at a very local level: few places were more than an hour or two's walk from a shop which stocked a remarkable range and quantity of goods. And, of course, these shops offered the chance to obtain information about consumer goods as well as access to the goods themselves. Village shops were therefore central to the emerging consumer society posited by Thirsk nearly forty years ago and much debated ever since. They formed an important window onto the world

³¹ CALS, WS1721, Joseph Strethill; WS1717 Joseph Pemberton.

³² CALS, WS1661, Edward Massey.

of goods; but was this an urban world (modern and innovative), or did it remain, as Estabrook argues, essentially rural and traditional?³³ The supply of the goods themselves was mostly organised through urban tradesmen, and there is little to distinguish urban and rural shops in terms of the types of goods they contained or how these were displayed to potential customers. Moreover, village shopkeepers appear to have had stronger social links to towns than did many of their neighbours, suggesting a growing urban impact on retail practices and, ultimately, consumption patterns in the countryside. However, it is difficult to judge the extent to which the social and economic lives of village shopkeepers (or the processes of rural consumption) were really influenced by links to their urban counterparts. The notion of rural and urban as separate spheres is untenable, but this does not mean that the countryside was progressively urbanised through retail and consumption practices. The village shop occupied a liminal position between town and country, yet it was ultimately embedded in the rural community, reliant upon village people for its custom and responsive to their needs and desires.

³³ C. Estabrook, *Urbane and Rustic England: Cultural Ties and Social Spheres in the Provinces, 1660-1780* (Manchester, 1998).