

The Shopping Streets of Provincial England, 1650-1840

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In Britain, the second half of the nineteenth century has long been associated with the emergence of mass markets and mass consumption. From traditionalist perspectives, growth in demand was fuelled by demographic growth and rising real wages, whilst increasingly efficient production and transport systems eased the supply of goods – making them cheaper and far more readily available. Working people could afford to indulge themselves and mark their growing respectability as never before, and the middle classes redefined their consumption practices to distance themselves from their social inferiors.¹ Retailing systems both responded to and helped to drive forward these changes. Indeed, retail historians in the 1950s and 1960s identified what they saw as a retail revolution taking place in the later nineteenth century.² This comprised a range of new retail formats and practices, with multiples and department stores pioneering the use of advertising, fixed prices, ticketing and cash sales, window displays, and so on. More recently, there have been attempts to uncouple retail revolution from ideas of mass retailing and mass consumption. In the 1980s, McKendrick saw the birth of a consumer society in eighteenth-century Britain and thus challenged the direction of causality linking consumer and industrial growth. More recently, a number of retail historians have highlighted the spread of ‘modern’ retail techniques in the eighteenth century and earlier.³ Retail revolution is now placed anywhere from the early-modern period onwards.

What is missing in many of these studies, however, is a consideration of how shops functioned and inter-related (with other urban activities) in spatial terms. Recent work by

Cox, Walsh and Stobart has begun to uncover some of the complexities of shops and shopping in the long eighteenth century.⁴ However, there has been little attempt to consider how provincial shopping streets, shops and the practices of shopping changed over the *longue durée*. That is the purpose of this paper: to explore the changing landscape of shopping in English provincial towns from around 1650 to 1850. Taking such a broad perspective inevitably means losing some detail, but it brings real advantages, most notably in terms of assessing key continuities and changes in the spaces and practices of shopping.

Shops and streets in early modern market towns

Shops were a common feature of medieval towns, but they grew significantly in number through the early modern period. A typical market town might contain a group of craftsmen-retailers (shoemakers, tailors and the like), together with a few mercers and drapers, perhaps with a grocer or ironmonger as well. The streets of larger towns were crowded with a growing number of shops. In the late sixteenth century, Norwich already had 111 tailors, 60 grocers, 51 shoemakers, 36 butchers, 23 bakers, 18 mercers and drapers, 13 barbers, 10 haberdashers, 8 cutlers, 7 apothecaries, 5 fishmongers, 4 goldsmiths, 3 stationers and 2 ironmongers together serving a population of perhaps 12,000. A century later, the town had grown to 20,000 inhabitants, and the list of shopkeepers now included vintners, gunsmiths, tobacconists, confectioners, upholsterers, and even a surgical instrument maker.⁵

Given the compact nature of early-modern towns, nowhere would be far from the market; but location was clearly important for shopkeepers. The market place had long been the principal arena for retail activity and in most towns it remained the key focus for shops and shopping throughout the early-modern period. The reasons for this are apparent from the autobiography of William Stout, a grocer in late seventeenth-century Lancaster. Recounting

his days as an apprentice, he noted that he had been ‘mostly employed in the shop on weekdays in making up goods for the market day’ and that ‘three or four of us [were] fully employed every market day in delivering out goods’.⁶ In some towns, the market was strung out along the main thoroughfares, which became important shopping streets and specialist areas developed as trades clustered together. In Chester, for example, the four main streets meeting at the cross contained most of the town’s shops. Within this, butchers were clustered along the street-level shops on Eastgate Street, shoemakers at the southern end of Northgate Street (the so-called Shoemaker’s Row), and wine merchants on the southern side of Watergate Street.

As the chapter by Claire Walsh makes clear in more detail, early-modern shops took a wide variety of forms, many of which would have been familiar to medieval shoppers. Increasingly, however, what people meant by a ‘shop’ was a room set within the house. Like their medieval predecessors, these were usually open-fronted and unglazed because the underlying imperatives of illumination and service through the window remained unchanged. Selling in this way was so important that it informed the language of guild rules and borough regulations: an unshuttered window signified that the shop was open for business.⁷ The advantages of this mode of selling were that it increased the speed of transaction, the chance to attract extra custom, and the opportunity to discriminate between different classes of customer. Stout’s autobiography again gives us some important insights here. He wrote that he ‘attended the shop in winter with the windows open, without sash or screen, till about nine in the evening, and with the windows shut and the door open till ten o’clock’.⁸

It appears that Stout served some customers through the window, whilst others came in through the door. But windows were also being used to create permanent displays of goods, designed to attract passing customers. For example, the 1671 inventory of Richard Butler, a woollen draper from Basingstoke (Hampshire), included ‘rowles of Cloth at window’,

probably draped to create a visual impact.⁹ Alternatively, customers might be engaged verbally rather than visually. In Cheapside, the shopkeepers' wives sat in the street to engage potential customers in conversation. As one contemporary noted: 'a fine-faced lady in a wainscot carved seat is a worthy ornament to a tradesman's shops, and an attractive one, I'll warrant. Her husband shall find it in the custom of this ware, I'll assure him'.¹⁰ Whilst most apparent in London's hothouse of trading, ballads suggest that the practice was known elsewhere: 'But if they wife be fair and thou be poor / Let her stand like a picture at thy door.'¹¹ Clearly, both doors and windows had a variety of functions in early-modern shops.

Shopping streets in the eighteenth century

As fixed shops became increasingly important to the provision of consumer goods in the eighteenth century, it was *their* location, rather than that of the market, that defined the principal arenas of shopping. This shift can be traced through newspaper advertisements, which increasingly used the location of other retail premises and former shop owners to define their position in the urban retail matrix. Thus we see Samuel Brooks advertising his grocer's shop as being opposite the Hen and Chickens on the High Street in Birmingham, and the Liverpool tea dealers, Bancroft and Lorimer occupying a shop 'near the top of Dale Steret, No.8, late occupied by Miss Edwardson'.¹² This was an important shift from earlier patterns, but the pace and extent of change varied from place to place. In some towns, the marketplace remained a key location: as late as 1780, an advertisement for a shop to let in Birmingham emphasised that, being 'fronted to two different Aspects of the ... Market', it had 'a good situation, if not the best of any in Town for a Retail Business'.¹³ Elsewhere, the market became more marginal and prime retail locations were defined much more by clustering of high status shops. In Chester there was a close concentration of drapers, mercers, grocers,

goldsmiths and toyshops along the east side of Bridge Street and the south side of Eastgate Street. These areas, and particularly the galleried first-floor Rows, were noted by contemporaries as having a ‘decided preference ... shops let here at high rents and are in never-failing request’.¹⁴

Such concentrations encouraged environmental improvement of many shopping streets – part of the general urban renaissance of post-Restoration England.¹⁵ This was a patchy and conditional process. Corporations, which ruled towns with a civic charter, were becoming more active in paving, lighting and cleaning urban streets from the late sixteenth century, although their attention was usually restricted to key central streets and was not always effective in making improvements. In Preston, for example, the corporation installed just four lamps at strategic locations in 1699, whilst in late eighteenth-century Liverpool piles of refuse accumulated to such an extent that ‘passengers in a dark night, and often in the day, tread in them to the midleg’.¹⁶ In non-corporate towns, where there was no central authority to finance and co-ordinate such activity, improvement initiatives remained in the hands of private landowners who often focused their attention on the construction of new residential streets. Improvement Commissions spread environmental improvement and the regulation of urban space to a broader range of towns in the late eighteenth and especially the early nineteenth century, but even these had a remit that was limited in both spatial and functional terms.¹⁷ Their efforts were also mixed: in Wolverhampton, the commissioners were active in pursuing the remit of their 1777 Act. They prosecuted those depositing rubbish in the streets and were vigorous in improving the market place and widening key streets. In contrast, William Hutton lambasted the commissioners in Birmingham for their feeble effort in erecting only a handful of lamps by the 1790s.¹⁸

Overall, the ability of Corporations and Improvement Commissions to intervene effectively in improving the urban environment grew considerably over the course of the long

eighteenth century. The result was an alignment of the street with the norms and aspirations of polite society. Shopping streets were often central to these schemes, a process which was furthered by a desire on the part of tradesmen to make their shops appealing to passers-by through the use of modern building materials and neo-classical forms of architecture. In Chester, there was a process of almost continual reconstruction and re-facing of the old half-timber buildings with more modern brick and plaster, along with fashionable sash or casement windows. There were frequent petitions from shopkeepers wishing to enclose the rows which ran through their premises. In 1772, for example, Thomas Moulson argued that he had acquired ‘some old buildings on the north side of Eastgate Street under which there was a dark row of little of no use and dangerous to passengers’. He asked for permission to pull these down and ‘erect handsome new houses’.¹⁹ Unusually for such a central location, the grant was requested. More often, shopkeepers were restricted to modernisation within the existing framework of the building. Roger Barnston, for example, was only allowed to enclose part of Bridge Street row on condition that he left ‘a convenient passage through the row.’²⁰

The most common improvements were extensions to the ground floor frontage. A petitioning shopkeeper often stressed the desire ‘to align his shop with the row above’ or to match that of his neighbour’s premises. The production of a flat frontage would, one shopkeeper argued, ‘contribute to the uniformity of the street’.²¹ At the same time, the Rows themselves were subject to improvement: the ceilings were raised and floors were repaired or re-laid; wooden pillars and banisters were ornamented with carving or replaced with stone columns and iron railings. Such modernisation was far from universal: Brown’s shop (later the famous department store) was described as ‘a splendid mansion, flanked by two mud-wall cow houses’.²² This reminds us that shops were not autonomous islands, but were set within a street increasingly bound by regulation, designed to produce a unified setting appropriate to

respectable and elegant lifestyles. William West acknowledged this in his description of Colmore Row in early-nineteenth-century Birmingham, noting that ‘the style of architecture, and the light and airy mode of fronting the houses, together with the elegance of the shops, has rendered this quarter of the town very attractive’.²³

Buildings and streets were thus harmonised and presented a unified and coherent space. In this way, they formed an increasingly conscious construction: they were both a symbol of the (supposed) unity and harmony of polite and progressive urban society, and a stage set for the performances of polite sociability that characterised much of the eighteenth century.²⁴ Yet shopping streets were not simply extensions of fashionable residential environments and public space: they had their own economic and social imperative, and their own architectural and visual character. One manifestation of this was shop signs which had proliferated in the seventeenth and early eighteenth century. However, just as in London, they were becoming so numerous in some provincial towns that they ceased to function as effective guides through the urban space. Moreover, they had grown to such a size that they met overhead in narrow streets and threatened to block the thoroughfare on some main streets – always a concern to urban authorities. In Chester, the corporation ordered the removal of all hanging or projecting signs put out by shopkeepers on the rows; they also prosecuted tradesmen who blocked the free flow along the row by constructing semi-permanent structures outside their shops.²⁵ The fact that these continued through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century suggests that increased regulation met with some resistance as shopkeepers sought to further their own ends.

These developments put a heightened emphasis on the shop front and particularly the shop window as the principal public face of the shop. The name of the retailer or premises transferred from a hanging board to the fascia of the shop front and the display of the goods on offer moved into the shop, increasingly behind protective glass.²⁶ This process was

gradual, limited by the by the high cost of glass and by the continuation of traditional practices of selling through the window. In provincial towns glass-fronts were apparent from the start of the eighteenth century, but only came to dominate in the early decades of the nineteenth century. A series of etchings of the main shopping streets in Chester, made around the turn of the eighteenth-nineteenth century, shows glazed windows with goods on display alongside shops with open fronts and goods being sold through the window. There are also shop-wares hung on the railings of the rows and occasionally arranged on the street outside the shop door.

Glass continued to be a significant investment for shopkeepers, but the outlay was worthwhile because windows allowed light into the shop and provided a new means for displaying goods.²⁷ Both of these points were made by Chester shopkeepers who, when they petitioned for the right to enlarge their windows, stressed the need to ‘lighten [the] shop and ornament it to public view’.²⁸ Window displays in provincial towns were generally quite simple: a cornucopia of goods being arranged in the window, often with a different item in each window pane – a practice assisted by the construction of shelving following the line of the glazing bars. Sometimes, though, more sophisticated displays were mounted, along the lines of those noted in London shops: ‘there is a cunning devise for showing women’s materials. They hang down in folds behind the fine, high windows so that the effect of this or that material, as it would be in a woman’s dress, can be studied.’²⁹ Whatever the approach, window displays were increasingly important, both in projecting the shop onto the street – thus attracting the attention of passers-by – and in bridging the divide between shop and street: drawing customers into the shop itself. Without proper display, there would be few customers, an equation recognised by Rutherford’s fictitious shopkeeper when he lamented that:

‘Somehow the business fell off. Customers as used to come didn’t come, and I got no new ones. I did my work pretty well; but still for all that, things went down by degrees. ... The shop, too, ought to have been painted more often, and I ought to have had something in the window, but, as I say, I was always dull ...’³⁰

The early nineteenth century: change and continuity

The early nineteenth century saw considerable growth in the number of shops, especially in fast-growing industrial centres, where shops had traditionally been less numerous. In contrast, growth was relatively modest in the more established and slower growing county and market towns. To an extent, these industrial centres were playing catch-up with their more service-oriented neighbours, with small-scale generalist ‘shopkeepers’ being the most rapidly growing set of retailers.³¹ Also apparent was the emergence of branch shops and even nascent multiple retailers. At one end of the scale were the fashionable London drapers that opened branches in spa and seaside resorts: firms such as Clark and Debenham, with their shops in Cheltenham and Harrogate, and Marshall and Snelgrove who had branches in Scarborough and later in Harrogate. More locally rooted – and much more prescient of later developments – were instances where provincial retailers listed two or more addresses for their business. Evidence from trade directories suggests that this practice grew significantly in the first half of the nineteenth century. In 1822 there were 31 retailers recording more than one address in Liverpool and Manchester; by 1851 the figure had risen to 215. Whilst some care is needed when interpreting these data, there are clear examples of retailers with more than one shop. The boot and shoemaker, George Summers, had a shop on Bold Street in Liverpool and another on Eastgate Row, Chester; whilst Kendal and Sons, a firm of toy dealers and cabinet makers, had shops in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Worcester and London.³²

Despite this expansion in numbers, the retail geography of many towns remained broadly stable during this period: especially outside the growing industrial and commercial centres, there was a strong degree of spatial lock-in. In Chester, Norwich, York and Northampton, for example, the best shops occupied the same streets in the 1830s as they had done in the eighteenth and even the seventeenth century. Central locations remained attractive to shopkeepers, in part because they were accessible to customers. When searching for suitable premises for a shop in 1815, the Manchester grocer, George Heywood, commended one which was on a ‘very public road over Old Bridge from Smythy Door’ – right in the centre of town. But he also admired the fact that ‘there is no other Grocer nearer than Littelwoods or Brudens’.³³ The need to weigh accessibility against the shadow cast by existing retailers led some shopkeepers to locate in areas of new residential development. In Liverpool, this process was so strong that the locus of the town’s shopping shifted to the south east. The traditional focus of retail activity was Dale Street and Water Street running down to George’s Dock, and High Street, Castle Street, Derby Square and Pool Lane which ran on a perpendicular axis to the Old Dock. These streets contained more than half of Liverpool’s high status retailers, one-quarter being concentrated into the stretch between the town hall in Derby Square and the exchange on the corner of High Street and Water Street.³⁴ In the early decades of the nineteenth century, these areas were increasingly associated with mercantile trade, the best shops being located instead in the middle-class residential areas in the south-east of the town. Most notable was Bold Street, which earned the epithet ‘Bond Street of the North’ – a comparison with London that reflects the capital’s position as the key (and often the only) point of reference for social and cultural commentators at this time.³⁵ At the same time, there was a sharp redistribution of grocers and lesser shopkeepers, away from central districts and into residential districts and arterial routes.³⁶

A similar process can be seen in Birmingham, although here the geographical shift was less profound. The construction of a wealthy quarter around St Philip's churchyard in the mid eighteenth century led to a gradual reorientation of the town's better shopping area away from the Bull Ring and towards New Street and Bull Street. By the 1830s, this area was being described not simply as the centre of the town's retail activity, but also the epitome of its growth and dynamism.

'we proceed in our circuit through *New street*, which evinces from its name and modern growth, and improvement, what it evidently is, the most attractive on in the town. The consequence and elegance of the well stocked shops, in articles of taste, of luxury, and of general consumption, arrest attention'.³⁷

What is particularly striking in this account is the way that shops are seen as markers of taste and modernity. It was shops that defined the character of the street and made it attractive, despite the fact that New Street also contained a range of iconic public buildings, including the Athenaeum, the Free Grammar School, the theatre, and the Society for the Encouragement of Fine Arts. Shops were thus central to the town's economic and cultural identity, a point which is all the more significant because West eschewed any comparisons with London, thus emphasising what he saw as Birmingham's cultural independence. Moreover, shops gave the street its functional and architectural coherence.

The early nineteenth century was also marked by significant changes in the scale and organisation of shops. Claire Walsh has highlighted the origins of department stores and their retail practices in the larger drapery shops of eighteenth-century London. Much the same can be seen in provincial towns, although perhaps a few decades later. Most obvious in West's account of New Street are the new emporia or warehouses. Drapers were prominent in these

developments: they offered a broader range of cloths, employed more assistants and their shops were built on an ever grander scale, filling a number of adjacent plots. This kind of growth can be seen in retailers such as Browns of Chester, which gradually expanded out from its initial premises on Eastgate Street, restyling or rebuilding in a variety of different architectural styles as the fashion of the day dictated. By the 1830s, the author of one town guide could argue, albeit with a good dollop of hyperbole, that ‘whether considered in reference to its splendour, or the richness of its wares, [it] would not suffer by a comparison with the magnificence of Regent’s Street’ – London again being the point of comparison.³⁸ West’s descriptions of shops were also littered with superlatives, but the crowning glory of New Street was the ‘extensive showrooms of Mr Charles Jones, at the Pantecnetheca’. Such was their splendour, West argued, ‘few persons pay Birmingham a visit without going through them, and of being gratified with the taste of the architect ... and of the proprietor’.³⁹

It is easy to dismiss these accounts as puffs, but it is striking both how many guidebooks began to take notice of shops around this time and how their descriptions all point to larger, more ornate and hugely more costly buildings. Such prominence in the literature reflected both changes on the provincial high street and also in the minds of those writing about towns. It presaged the way in which shops increasingly marked the geographical and commercial, but also the cultural and social centre of the Victorian city. Moreover, these provincial emporia were not simply pale reflections of their London counterparts; they were often literally glittering examples of the art of shop fitting: designed by local architects as built as statements of civic as well as business strength.⁴⁰

The emporia were by no means the most remarkable interior spaces dedicated to retailing in the early-nineteenth-century provincial town. Bazaars formed perhaps the most striking retail innovation of the early nineteenth century, although their spread and character outside London is difficult to discern. They shared a similar format to the shopping galleries

of seventeenth-century London exchanges, with individual traders (many of them women) renting counters in a large building. Indeed, there was sometimes a seamless transition from one format to the other. In 1807, the Exeter Exchange, originally built as a shopping gallery, was being described as ‘precisely a bazaar’, selling ‘such articles as might tempt an idler or remind a passenger of his wants’.⁴¹ However, bazaars formed a genuinely new and dramatic setting for shopping: one that was extremely popular with shoppers. When the first true bazaar was opened by John Trotter on Soho Square in 1816, its immediate success sparked a storm of protest from shopkeepers and spawned many imitators, first in London and later in Manchester (1821), Leeds (1826), Bath (1824 and 1831), and Norwich (1831) amongst others.⁴² They varied considerably in size and in the range of goods being sold, but the usual staples were ‘fancy articles’ or semi-luxury goods of the kind that filled the parlours of the burgeoning middle classes and ‘marked their status with gilded paper and lace’.⁴³ The stalls were invariably housed in large buildings which were ever more lavishly decorated, even in the provinces, the Norfolk and Norwich Royal Bazaar (1831) having a gallery reached by a double staircase supported by ornamental iron pillars shaped like palm trees.

Around the same time, provincial towns were also being colonised by another retail innovation. Arcades form a rare example of a retail format copied from continental Europe; their origins being traced to the Galeries de Bois in Paris.⁴⁴ However, this inspiration was mediated through London, the first English arcade being the rather moribund Royal Opera Arcade (1817), soon followed by the far more successful Burlington Arcade (1818). Its small shops were quickly filled with drapers, milliners, haberdashers, booksellers, toy sellers, shoemakers, hosiers and glovers; all of them catering for elite customers. The commercial and social success of the Burlington Arcade encouraged the construction of other arcades in London and provincial towns. Amongst the earliest examples of latter was the Pelham Arcade in Hastings (1825) where the twenty-eight shops had counters set within arched openings – an

arrangement strongly echoing the earlier Exchanges. Closer to the model of the London arcades were the Upper and Lower Arcades in Bristol (1824-25), The Corridor in Bath (1825), the Argyle Arcade in Glasgow (1827), and the Royal Arcade in Newcastle (1832). In these, rows of shops were set along straight corridors, often running between two streets. There were some attempts to move away from this set pattern, as at Ryde on the Isle of Wight (1835), where a central rotunda was included in a three-armed arcade, but arcades generally remained fairly modest schemes in the first half of the nineteenth century. It was only from the 1870s that they became a central and much grander feature of the retail landscape, especially in the industrial towns of the Midlands and north where they formed an important alternative to department store shopping.⁴⁵

Shopping practices: a long term perspective

Shopping has always been a serious business which involves acquiring goods at the best price, and requires considerable knowledge and skill in the shopper. In early modern times, servants might be sent to the market for everyday purchases; but many people shopped in person, preferring to make comparisons themselves rather than trust the servant to choose wisely or drive a hard bargain. This was true for all manner of foodstuffs, with a growing number of instruction manuals being published to guide the shopper in the art of selecting the best pieces of meat or the choicest vegetables.⁴⁶ However, it was particularly important when buying durable items, where choice, fashion and taste were most important. Careful consumers would visit a number of shops, inspecting goods carefully to assess their worth, quality and suitability before making their selection. These shopping trips would often be made in the company of others who made the process more sociable and perhaps helped to select goods. Indeed, a knowledgeable companion was an important asset when shopping. As

one contributor to the *Female Tatler* in 1709 noted: ‘this afternoon some ladies, having an opinion of my fancy in cloaths, desired me to accompany them to [the shops] which I take to be as agreeable an amusement as a lady can pass away three or four hours.’⁴⁷

Whilst we know a lot about shopping in London, the lack of rich sources makes it difficult to judge the extent to which such practices spread to provincial towns. That said, the available material suggests that consumers outside the metropolis were not so very different in their practices and motivations. Right at the start of the eighteenth century, Henry Prescott, a notary in Chester, recorded in his diary that ‘After a Turn, to Mr Minshalls where Mr Murrey buys a Bible for 1li. 2s. 6d. Wee go, Mr Denton with us, to the Fountain where wee carry on the discourse in singular pints.’⁴⁸ The transition appears seamless: Prescott moved from promenading, to shopping and to socialising, gathering friends along the way. A century later, Anne Lister’s shopping in York were similarly interspersed with planned or chance encounters, despite her lack of easy sociability. On 21 April 1823, ‘Miss Yorke called at 2¼ for me to walk. We went to Rigg’s garden, bought geraniums, then sauntered to the white house at the bar.’ Four days earlier, she had gone out walking and ‘passed Mr Christopher Rawson & Mrs Empson near the bridge’. She then ‘went to Breary, the coachmaker, to inquire about a pony-carriage’ and again saw ‘Mr Christopher Rawson, Mrs Empson and Eliza Belcombe on the other side of the street’.⁴⁹ Such practices mark the everyday nature of shopping; its growing importance as a leisure activity, and the ways in which these activities involved streets as well as shops.

Leisure shopping was important in allowing customers to judge the quality of goods; it also provided a means of acquiring more general consumer intelligence of both goods and shops. Both the physical structure of the shop, with its growing emphasis on visual display, and the old-established practices of service selling encouraged a degree of browsing within shops. Retailers of durable goods in particular were quite used to showing customers a range

of wares from which to choose, even if they sometimes complained about it. Shopping could also involve browsing in several shops, as it had in London's exchanges a century earlier. As the German visitor Johanna Schopenhauer wrote:

‘We set off shopping ... going into at least twenty shops, having a thousand things shown to us which we do not wish to buy, in fact turning the whole shop upside down and, in the end, perhaps leaving without purchasing anything. It is impossible to admire sufficiently the patience of the shopkeepers, who endure this nonsense without ever dreaming of showing annoyance.’⁵⁰

Shopkeepers were not always so sanguine, but most accepted that customers would inspect their goods and engage the shopkeeper or his assistants in a lively exchange, without always making purchases.

The growing use of window displays encouraged a leisurely perambulation of the shops, with promenading and shopping combining as polite social activities. This placed as much emphasis on the appearance of consumer as it did on the goods or the shop. The couples peering at the window displays of Banks' Norfolk and Norwich Tea Warehouse in their 1830s tradecard are depicted in fashionable and respectable clothing. More striking is the fictional Evelina's account of her shopping trips: ‘At the milliners, the ladies that we met were so much dressed, that I rather imagined they were making visits than purchases.’⁵¹ In London and the resort towns, the link between shopping and sociability was explicit: morning trips to bookshops or drapers were mixed with visits to pump rooms or gardens, walks along promenades, or tea with friends. Lady Luxborough wrote of Bath that, starting ‘from the bookseller's shop we take a tour through the milliners and toymen; and commonly shop at Mr Gill's, the pastry-cook, to take a jelly, a tart, or a small basin of vermicelli.’⁵² This routine was

echoed in the practices of leisurely promenading and shopping seen in ordinary provincial towns. The ladies and gentlemen of Colne, for example, would walk the streets and gather at Betty Hartley's general store for tea.⁵³ It was closely linked with improvements to the physical environment, making shopping streets polite promenades where browsing and display – seeing and being seen – went hand-in-hand.⁵⁴ In Chester, the fashionable rows were being described by early nineteenth-century commentators as 'convenient for a quiet lounge to ladies and others engaged in shopping', whilst engravings showed well-dressed couples promenading the shop-lined walkways.⁵⁵

Yet such polite and leisurely shopping was disrupted by other, competing uses of the urban street. There was obvious conflict with a range of plebeian pastimes. Bull-baiting remained widespread through the eighteenth and into the nineteenth century, often taking place in the market place or the principal shopping streets: baiting in Chester took place at the High Cross, in Preston it occurred in the market place; in Manchester at Hydes Cross, and in Stockport's on Chestergate, the principal thoroughfare. In Liverpool, bears were processed through the main public and commercial spaces of the town – from the market place to the exchange and thence along Derby Street to the stock market – baiting taking place in each location.⁵⁶ Around the same time, cock-throwing was taking place on Eastgate Street in Chester, in the face of complaints from some of the city's professional classes.⁵⁷ There were also considerable tensions between shops and fairs, despite the economic and spatial interdependence of the two. In Manchester it was argued that street stalls were not only a hindrance to traffic but also brought together 'a class of persons of indifferent character and generally lowered the tone of the immediate neighbourhood'.⁵⁸ And in Chester there were heightened complaints and prosecutions for shoplifting during fair-time.⁵⁹ It is easy to overplay the apparent conflict between polite and plebeian uses of the street.⁶⁰ In any case, tensions were gradually eased in the early decades of the nineteenth century: partly through

the spreading prohibition of plebeian leisure practices and partly through the segregation of commercial functions into dedicated spaces. Livestock markets were often pushed off the main street and out to the margins of the town, whilst retail markets were increasingly corralled into newly built halls.⁶¹ This process began in the late eighteenth century, but the birth of the modern market hall is usually seen in the construction of St John's market in Liverpool (1820), with similar developments soon appearing elsewhere – especially in the larger commercial towns of the Midlands and North.

These structures effectively internalised shopping at the market; a process also seen in other retail innovations of the early nineteenth century. Emporia, by offering a wider range of goods within a single shop, brought some processes of comparative browsing and leisurely shopping off the street and into the shop – a development often associated with later nineteenth century department stores. Emporia were increasingly popular, in part because they offered greater variety and perhaps cheaper prices, but also because they provided a different shopping environment. They were spacious and elegantly furnished, in many ways resembling other public spaces such as assembly rooms: there were gilded and plasterwork ceilings, grand staircases, and elaborate chandeliers or top-lit galleries.⁶² It is no accident that West's account of New Street in Birmingham intermingles elegant shops with the town's cultural infrastructure.⁶³ But these grand shops were also commercial spaces, with long mahogany counters and large plate-glass windows. The latter allowed retailers greater scope for window displays and customers greater opportunities for window-shopping and perhaps fantasising about ownership.⁶⁴

The size and elaborate ornamentation of emporia helped to change the retail landscape in provincial towns, but the practices of shopping remained much the same: customers still sat at a counter whilst an assistant brought goods to them. For many shoppers, this was clearly an effective and pleasant way of shopping, but the growing popularity of bazaars and arcades,

with their more active browsing and leisure shopping suggest that there was also demand for new kinds of shopping experiences. Bazaars, in particular, brought together ideas of shopping and leisure in new ways. They not only contained a range of facilities – refreshment rooms, rest rooms and sometimes lavatories – which were important in encouraging ladies in particular to prolong their visits; but also created a unique fusion of shopping and entertainment. This is apparent from the advertisement placed in the Manchester press by John Watts to announce the opening of his newly rebuilt premises on Deansgate. These were described in bold capitals as: ‘THE BAZAAR and the EXHIBITION OF WORKS OF ART, INCLUDING DIORAMA, PHYSIORAMA, ETC.’ After detailing some of the modus operandi of the bazaar, Watts concluded by stating that: ‘A portion of the Establishment will be appropriated for various interesting and amusing Exhibitions and Woks of Genius.’⁶⁵

The type of entertainments advertised by Watt were typical of those included in bazaars across the country. They centred on the visual and the spectacular, with panoramas and dioramas being particular favourites. These were often executed at an enormous scale: one 1834 exhibition included a 2,000 square foot canvas of the *Destruction of Jerusalem*, whilst another used 10,000 square feet of canvas and a series of mechanical drums to create the illusion of travelling on a train from Manchester to Liverpool. Such attractions drew the crowds into bazaars and thus generated extra potential customers for the commodities on sale. Admission fees, programme sales and souvenir prints brought in money directly and made the dioramas and panoramas commodities in themselves. Entertainment did not stop at displaying works of art. The Queen’s bazaar had a magician in 1835 as did Tulley’s Bazaar in Gravesend a few years later. More elaborate was the series of exhibitions mounted at the New Royal Bazaar in 1831. This comprised ‘the Mechanical and Musical Automats, which were expressly made for the Emperor of China ... and cost upwards of 30,000/’, along with ‘an Experiment in Chemistry, called the Laughing Gas, after which ... Magnificent Evanescent

Views and Optical Illusions, and the celebrated Dance of Witches'. All this was available for just 1s 6d.⁶⁶

These entertainments were part of the emphasis which bazaars placed on display and spectacle in an attempt to draw in shoppers. They combined with the drama of the large rooms, the ornate ceilings and the galleried sales floors to create a new kind of shopping experience. Shopping as leisure and as a form of entertainment was not new, of course: the shopping galleries of the seventeenth-century exchanges and the showrooms of high-class eighteenth-century shops had encouraged browsing and made shopping part of the social round. Yet bazaars built on these established modes of behaviour, bringing together browsing, shopping and entertainment in a single establishment. Moreover, they increased the scale at which retailing was organised. Bazaars were, by contemporary standards, huge buildings designed as stage sets on which the drama of shopping – and of mutual display – could unfold. Indeed, it was often said that shoppers in bazaars – especially those of the upper classes – went there to display themselves and inspect others rather than the goods offered for sale. Buying was, perhaps, the last thing on their minds.⁶⁷

Epilogue: department stores and multiples in the late nineteenth century

In their emphasis on comparison and leisurely shopping, bazaars had important continuities with the past. But they also presaged many of the innovations often attributed to the department stores which eventually usurped them as the most alluring and dramatic shopping environments of the nineteenth century. This exemplifies the way in which developments in the early nineteenth century can be seen as an important bridge between what might be seen as consumer-driven changes in the eighteenth century and the more retailer-centred innovations of the later nineteenth century. Certainly, a fuller understanding of the nature and

spread of bazaars, emporia and multi-shop retailers would help to put both earlier and later changes into perspective. Even the brief sketch provided here suggests that department stores and multiples were not as revolutionary as they are sometimes presented as being. In their appearance, retail practices and relationship with shopping behaviour, they appear more evolutionary. This impression is heightened when one considers the gradual growth in the scale of their operation (most accreted premises and opened branches over a number of years or even decades) and the introduction of more ‘modern’ practices (such as self-service).⁶⁸ Moreover, the visual and architectural transformation of the high street is an equally drawn-out process. Glazed windows, arcades, bazaars, emporia and department stores are all important punctuation marks along the way, but their impact – outside some major and planned developments, such as Regent Street in London, and Grainger Street in Newcastle – is overshadowed by more recent changes, such as the rise of corporate architecture in the early twentieth century and Local Authority redevelopment of town centres in the post-war era.⁶⁹

Where does all this leave the idea of a retail revolution? As I noted at the outset, the axiomatic linking of this concept with the late nineteenth century has already been undermined by our growing awareness of the sophistication of retail systems and practices in earlier centuries. Whilst we might be able to rescue the concept by focusing on productivity gains and management structures, there is more to be gained by focusing on the relationship between retailing and consumption, and the ways in which shopping brought these together. In particular, we should be less concerned with ideas of modernity and more attuned to the ways in which retailing and shopping met the needs of contemporary consumers.

Notes

¹ See J. Benson (1994) *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980* (London: Longman); D. Cohen (2006) *Household Gods. The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven : Yale U.P.).

² The two classic studies are: J. Jefferys (1954) *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P.); P. Mathias (1967) *Retailing Revolution. A history of Multiple Retailing in the Food Trades* (London: Longman).

³ C. Fowler (1998), 'Changes in Provincial Retail Practice during the Eighteenth Century', *Business History*, XL, pp. 37-54; N. Cox (2000) *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing, 1550-1820* (Aldershot: Ashgate); J. Stobart and A. Hann (2004) 'Retailing Revolution in the Eighteenth Century: Evidence from North-West England', *Business History*, XLVI, pp. 171-94.

⁴ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*; C. Walsh (1995) 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London', *Journal of Design History*, VIII, pp. 157-176; J. Stobart, A. Hann and V. Morgan (2007) *Spaces of Consumption. Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1680-1830* (London and New York: Routledge).

⁵ J. Patten (1978) *English Towns, 1500-1700* (Folkestone: Dawson), pp.261-4, 283.

⁶ W. Stout (1967) *Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665-1752* (Manchester: Manchester U.P.), p.79.

⁷ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, p.78; J. Stobart (2008), *Spend, Spend, Spend. A History of Shopping* (Stroud: Tempus), p.55.

⁸ Stout, *Autobiography*, p.80.

⁹ The National Archives, PROB 4/21215 inventory of Richard Butler of Basingstoke, woollen draper.

¹⁰ J. Marston (1607), *The Dutch Courtesan*, quoted in P. Stubbes (1877), *The Anatomie of Abuses*, II, p.276.

¹¹ Quoted in D. Davis (1966), *History of Shopping* (London : Routledge), p.110.

¹² *Adams Weekly Courant*, 7 November 1775; *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 30 September 1782.

¹³ *Aris's Birmingham Gazette*, 19 June 1780.

¹⁴ H. Roberts (1851), *The Chester Guide* (Chester: Chester City Council), p.65.

¹⁵ See P. Borsay (1989), *The English Urban Renaissance. Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660-1770* (Oxford : Clarendon Press).

¹⁶ M. Falkus (1976) 'Lighting in the Dark Ages of English Economic History: Town Streets before the Industrial Revolution', in D.C. Coleman and A.H. John (eds), *Trade and Economy in Pre-Industrial England* (London :

Weidenfeld and Nicolson), p. 259; J. Touzeau (1910), *The Rise and Progress of Liverpool* (Liverpool : Liverpool Booksellers Co), vol.1, pp. 429.

¹⁷ Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, pp. 87-92;

¹⁸ W. A. Smith, *The Town Commissioners in Wolverhampton, 1777-1848* (unpublished MS), pp.xviii, xxxv; Borsay, *Urban Renaissance*, pp. 72-4.

¹⁹ Chester and Chester Archives [CCA], Chester Assembly Books [A/B] 4/99v.

²⁰ CCA, A/B/3/186.

²¹ CCA, A/B/4/298; CCA A/B/4/149; CCA, A/B/4/25.

²² J. Hemingway (1831) *History of the City of Chester* (Chester), vol. 1, p. 410.

²³ W. West, *The History, Topography and Directory of Warwickshire* (1830), p.182.

²⁴ See R. Sweet (2002) 'Topographies of Politeness', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, XII, pp. 355-74; Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, chapter 4; P. Borsay (1984), 'All the Town's a Stage: Urban Ritual and Ceremony, 1660-1800' in P. Clark (ed.) *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns, 1600-1800* (London: Hutchinson), pp. 228-58.

²⁵ CCA, A/B/6/506. For examples of prosecutions for erecting stalls on the rows, see: CCA, A/B/2/195v, A/B/3/46v, A/B/4/153v.

²⁶ Davis, *History of Shopping*, pp. 189-90; K. Morrison (2003), *English Shops and Shopping. An Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale U.P.), pp. 41-3.

²⁷ See Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, pp. 96-7.

²⁸ CCA, A/B/4/259v.

²⁹ S. Von La Roche (1933) *Sophie in London*, ed. C. Williams (London: Jonathan Cape), p. 87.

³⁰ M. Rutherford (1887) *Revolution in Tanner's Lane* (London: Trubner), p. 48.

³¹ A. Hann (2005), 'Industrialisation and the Service Economy' in J. Stobart and N. Raven (eds) *Towns, Regions and Industries. Urban and Industrial Change in the Midlands, c. 1700-1840* (Manchester: Manchester U.P.), pp. 51-2, 61; D. Alexander (1970), *Retailing in England during the Industrial Revolution* (London: The Athlone Press) pp. 90-7.

³² Alexander, *Retailing in England*, pp. 105-7.

³³ John Ryland Library, Eng. MS 703 Diary of George Heywood, 19 February 1815.

³⁴ Stobart and Hann, 'Retailing Revolution', p. 177.

³⁵ See Lawton, 'Age of great cities', p. 206.

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- ³⁶ For fuller discussion of the geography of grocery retailing, see: J. Stobart, *Sugar and Spice. Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 98-105.
- ³⁷ West, *History of Warwickshire*, p. 210.
- ³⁸ Hughes, *Stranger's Handbook*, p. 46.
- ³⁹ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp. 187-8.
- ⁴⁰ Morrison, *English Shops*, pp. 126-32.
- ⁴¹ R. Southey (1951) *Letters from England*, ed. J. Simmons (London: Crescent Press), p. 53.
- ⁴² Morrison, *English Shops*, p. 95; T. Whitlock (2005), *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 45-6, 52.
- ⁴³ Whitlock, *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture*, p. 53.
- ⁴⁴ Morrison, *English Shops*, p. 99.
- ⁴⁵ Morrison, *English Shops*, pp. 102-06.
- ⁴⁶ C. Walsh (2008) 'Shopping at First Hand? Mistresses, Servants and Shopping for the Household in Early-Modern England' in M. Ponsoy and D. Hussey (eds) *Buying for the Home. Shopping for the Domestic from the Seventeenth Century to the Present* (Aldershot: Ashgate), pp. 13-26.
- ⁴⁷ *Female Tatler* quoted in Walsh, 'Shop Design', p. 171.
- ⁴⁸ H. Prescott (1987) 'The Diary of Henry Prescott, Vol. I', ed. J. Addy, *Records Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, CXXVII, 24 April 1705.
- ⁴⁹ A. Lister (1988), *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791-1840*, ed. H. Whitbread (London: Virago), pp. 249-50.
- ⁵⁰ J. Schopenhauer (1988), *A Lady Travels: Journeys in England and Scotland from the Diaries of Johanna Schopenhauer* (London: Routledge), p. 151.
- ⁵¹ F. Burney (1788) *Evelina* (London) p. 25.
- ⁵² T. Fawcett (1985), *Voices of Eighteenth-Century Bath. An Anthology* (Bath: Ruton), p. 85.
- ⁵³ A.J. Vickery (1998), *The Gentleman's Daughter. Women's lives in Georgian England* (New Haven: Yale U.P.), pp. 251-2.
- ⁵⁴ Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, pp. 86-110.
- ⁵⁵ Roberts, *The Chester Guide*, p. 64.
- ⁵⁶ G. Ormerod (1819), *The History of the County Palatine and City of Chester* (London: Lackington etc.) vol. I, p. 302; A. Hewitson (1883) *History of Preston in the County of Lancaster* (Preston: Chronicle Office), pp. 300-01; E. Griffin (2005), *England's Revelry. A History of Popular Sports and Pastimes 1660-1830* (Oxford: Oxford

U.P.), p. 68; P. Arrowsmith (1997), *Stockport: A History* (Stockport); T. Troughton (1810) *History of Liverpool* (Liverpool: Robinson), pp. 93-4.

⁵⁷ H. Prescott (1994) 'The diary of Henry Prescott, Vol. II', ed. J. Addy and P. McNiven, *Records Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, CXXXII, 25 March 1718.

⁵⁸ 'Memorial Received from Shopkeepers in the Old Market Place' quoted in J. Schmiechen and K. Carls, *The British Market Hall. A Social and Architectural History* (New Haven: Yale U.P.), p. 18.

⁵⁹ I. Mitchell (2007), 'The Changing Role of Fairs in the Long Eighteenth Century: Evidence from the North Midlands', *Economic History Review*, LX, p. 563.

⁶⁰ See Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, p. 108.

⁶¹ J. Stobart, 'Shopping Streets as Social Space', pp. 16-17; Schmeichen and Carls, *British Market Hall*, pp. 28-31.

⁶² See Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, pp. 123-5.

⁶³ West, *History of Warwickshire*, pp. 187-200.

⁶⁴ See C. Walsh (1999), 'The Newness of the Department Store: a View from the Eighteenth Century' in G. Crossick and S. Jaumain (eds), *Cathedrals of Consumption. The European Department Store 1850-1939* (Aldershot: Ashgate).

⁶⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 22 March 1831

⁶⁶ Whitlock, *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture*, pp. 57-9, 49.

⁶⁷ Whitlock, *Crime, Gender and Consumer Culture*, p. 52.

⁶⁸ G. Shaw (1992), 'The Evolution and Impact of Large-Scale Retailing in Britain', in J. Benson and G. Shaw (eds), *The Evolution of Retail Systems, 1800-1914* (Leicester: Leicester U.P.).

⁶⁹ Morrison, *English Shops*, chapter 10 and 11.