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## Cathedrals of consumption? Provincial department stores in England, c.1880-1930

### Contexts and departures: global and local

From their first appearance in mid nineteenth century Paris or New York – the precise point of origin is disputed between the Bon Marche and Stewart's Marble Palace – department stores have been seen as a revolutionary force that transformed retail practices, experiences of shopping and the geography of the high street, helping to define the modern city and modern urban life. Both the stores and their owners are regarded as giants of retailing, financially and physically dominating the smaller shops around them.<sup>1</sup> These leviathans fed off the burgeoning and increasingly wealthy populations of great cities, especially northern hemisphere metropolises.<sup>2</sup> In retailing terms, they are seen as instrumental in the introduction and spread of fixed and ticketed prices; the open display and advertising of goods; the reorganisation of business along modern, rational lines; rising levels of productivity, and a massively increased scale of spatial and financial organisation.<sup>3</sup> For the city, their sheer bulk and monumental architecture transformed the appearance of the High Street; they remoulded flows of people and goods through the urban space, and served as anchors around which retail geographies were formed and reformed. This was seen in the creation of the so-called 'Ladies Mile' on Sixth Avenue, New York and the monumental scale of US and Parisian stores which embodied the 'myth of a new order of commerce'.<sup>4</sup> From the perspective of consumers, they opened up the possibility of browsing with new, unfettered access to goods; created a dream-world of goods linked to the contemporary craze for trade exhibitions, and produced gendered practices of shopping, not least by releasing women from the constraints placed upon them when on the public street – a viewpoint that owes much to Zola's *Au Bonheur des Dames*. Indeed, he argued that the 'department store tends to replace the church. It marches to the religion of the cash desk, of beauty, of coquetry, and fashion. [Women] go there to pass the hours as they used to go to church: an occupation, a place of enthusiasm ...'.<sup>5</sup>

This is the received wisdom about department stores. They were undoubtedly a phenomenon – perhaps *the* phenomenon of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century retailing – and thus merit much deeper and wider scrutiny than they have received. But this means going beyond those that are internationally famous to include the variety of formats, practices and experiences that characterised provincial stores and, as Jeane Lawrence has urged, challenging the image of the department store as a dreamworld.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, we should be wary of collapsing all department stores onto a single model, influence or experience, as continues to be all too common in the literature.<sup>7</sup> Overseas visitors to London were very much alive to differences between British stores and their French and American counterparts, and it would be wrong to assume that all British stores reflected London practices and experiences. As Helen Bertramsen observes, 'in contrast to what many recent historians and

sociologists have argued, there was nothing monolithic about the stores' – a sentiment which echoes Lawrence's arguments about intra- as well as inter-urban differences in the USA.<sup>8</sup> Exploring how broader processes, practices and experiences played out in provincial towns and stores provides the opportunity to test the transformative nature of department stores against a growing body of studies which suggest that many of the revolutionary features of department stores had been tried and tested in earlier times and more established retail formats.<sup>9</sup>

Doing this brings a number of challenges. One is the evidence base, which is fragmented and often limited for smaller provincial stores, encouraging store histories rather than systematic analysis.<sup>10</sup> Another is the fundamental issue of definition. The universal providers in London and the *grand magasins* in Paris were clearly department stores by any measure. Similarly the flagship stores of provincial retailers such as Lewis's or Beatties were conceived on a scale that puts their status beyond question. More problematical is the position of the more modest premises that characterised less prominent sites in large cities and the high streets of smaller towns. What were their defining characteristics and what criteria can be deployed to differentiate them from other large shops? There is little agreement about how these questions might be answered. James Jefferys rested his definition on size and the range of goods being sold, arguing that a department store was a 'large retail store with four or more separate departments under one roof, each selling different classes of goods of which one is women's and children's wear' – the line that was often most important in generating turnover, accounting to about 40 per cent of sales in British department stores in the 1938.<sup>11</sup> Nikolaus Pevsner and Gareth Shaw qualified this definition by emphasising respectively the importance of scale and variety, and the organisation of activity: specifically, the presence of central operating functions, such as an accounts department.<sup>12</sup> In essence, such definitions follow contemporary ideas which are neatly, if somewhat dismissively, summed up by H.G. Wells: 'One of those large, rather low-class establishments which sell everything from pianos and furniture to books and millinery – a department store'.<sup>13</sup> But here we hit a problem over the assumed clientele of department stores; as Peter Scott and James Walker argue, they were highly differentiated by the class of customer served and the quality of goods and service provided.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Thomas Markus moves us beyond definitions based on size and variety to ones focused on the spatial layout of the store, emphasising the placement of counters and the movement of shoppers into and through the store. And Jan Whitaker highlights the grandeur of the store and the experience of the customer, especially the freedom to browse open displays.<sup>15</sup>

This confusion – coupled with the fact that, even in the 1930s, very few shops in Britain used the label 'department store' to describe themselves – has served to further discourage systematic analyses of the development of department stores at the national level.<sup>16</sup> And yet a more thorough understanding of the emergence and spread of department stores across the country is central to a proper assessment of their role in any retail revolution. My aim in this paper is thus twofold.

I begin by presenting a national survey of department stores, mapping their changing distribution across England between the 1870s and 1930s. This is achieved via a systematic trawl of Kelly's trade directories which offer standardised national coverage throughout the study period. Local directories occasionally offer more detail, but their varied nature and patchy coverage (often omitting smaller towns) makes them less suited for national analysis.<sup>17</sup> That said, Kelly's are not without their problems, as Shaw and others have noted.<sup>18</sup> Their coverage is far from complete, although it is smaller back-street shops that tend to be omitted rather than the substantial businesses with which we are concerned. More problematic is the fact Lancashire does not appear to have had a Kelly's directory for c.1930 and there are no obvious local alternatives; the county is therefore omitted from the analysis. Another challenge is the absence of 'department store' as a category or descriptor in Kelly's or other directories. For example, both Blackett's in Sunderland and Knight & Lee Ltd in Southsea occupied substantial premises and sold a range of goods; yet both were listed in the directories simply as 'drapers'. This omission necessitates a close and nuanced reading of the listings: drawing on Jeffreys's definition (four or more distinct lines) and Shaw's emphasis of scale of operation, I started with a 'long-list' of possible department stores based on the size of premises (normally 3 or more adjacent plot frontages) and the range of goods listed as being sold (at least four). This excluded multiples selling a variety of wares (e.g. C&A and Marks and Spencer), but included Co-operative central stores, many of which were operating as de facto department stores by the 1920s. Each shop identified in the initial trawl was exhaustively checked against newspaper advertisements and a range of secondary data sources, including oral histories available on-line. Only those stores for which corroborative evidence could be found were included as department stores; others were noted as 'possible' department stores, but not included in the main analysis. Thus, for example, Patricks Ltd of Coventry – occupying 1-5a Much Park Street and 48-49 Jordan Well and listed in Kelly's as a milliner, draper, ladies outfitter and furnishing store, and thus potentially a department store – was not included because no other source could be found confirming this status. Such businesses overlap with Jeffreys's notion of a 'part department store' (i.e. a shop with more than one department, but not a full department store<sup>19</sup>), but include many shops operating a much larger scale than this simple definition would imply. Their omission means that estimates of department store numbers are conservative. Notwithstanding the danger of creating a teleological view which projects modernity back into earlier ages, I begin with the most recent date, when the identity of shops as department stores is most readily ascertained, and then trace back a sample of these to establish earlier distributions and numbers, assessing the factors that shaped this changing geography.

In the second part of the paper, I turn to more qualitative sources to examine some of the retail and shopping practices that characterised department stores beyond the bright lights of metropolitan centres. Rather than business practices, this involves exploring the organisation and layout of stores, and the experiences of consumers – all of which were important elements in distinguishing department

stores from other shops. Here, I assess the extent to which provincial department stores formed a step-change from earlier retail and shopping practices.

### **Distribution patterns in the 1930s**

Evidence from the trade directories suggests that department stores were more widespread by the 1930s than previously believed. Over 500 shops across England have been definitely identified as department stores, from Wright and Son in Carlisle to Chiesmans in Maidstone. This figure is at the top end of Jefferys estimate of 475-525 in 1938,<sup>20</sup> yet not only excludes Lancashire, but also a similar number of ‘possible’ department stores. Even if a small proportion of these were to be added, along with perhaps 50 stores in Lancashire, the overall number of stores would rise to well over 600. Perhaps more striking, though, is their uneven distribution across the country, the main concentrations being found in greater London, the north east and the south east. Far lower numbers were recorded in the east Midlands and along the Welsh border: Huntingdonshire contained only one department store, and Shropshire and Herefordshire had just two each (a sparsity which points to under-recording). To an extent, this pattern reflected demand in terms of population numbers, but mapping stores *per capita* reveals a rather more nuanced picture (Table 1). The concentration of provision in the Home Counties and the south stands out, with counties such as Berkshire and Hertfordshire having *per capita* provision twice the national average; in contrast, the absolute concentration in the north east is dissipated.

[Table 1 here]

These disparities might be partly explained by the different nature of urban development in the two regions: an industrial north with a large proportion of poorer working class people, without the means to shop in department stores, contrasted with a more variegated south, containing new manufacturing towns, resorts, commuter settlements and many smaller market towns. Such arguments effectively equate the distribution of department stores with that of the wealth and status of their customer base – that is, demand. This broad relationship is underscored by differences in wage and employment levels, a point emphasised by Scott and Walker.<sup>21</sup> Those counties with above average unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s were in the north and west of the country, whilst those with the lowest rates were in the midlands and especially the southeast. Average wages followed a similar pattern, both distributions being the product of industrial decline and a realignment of the economy to consumer industries.<sup>22</sup>

Demand, in terms of the spending power of the local population, would therefore appear to have been a key determinant in the distribution of department stores in the interwar years. However, there are several problems with this simple north-south dichotomy. First, the caricature of the population of the industrial north as an undifferentiated proletarian mass is far too simplistic. Although unemployment

undoubtedly hit hardest in the north, limiting local spending power, Lancaster argues that the lower middle-classes – who comprised the principal clientele of many department stores – were growing most rapidly in the industrial towns of the north during the early decades of the twentieth century. As early as 1910, white-collar workers, from clerks to school teachers, formed around 8 per cent of the workforce in Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle and Hull, but just 2-3 per cent in Wiltshire, Lincolnshire and Buckinghamshire.<sup>23</sup> At least on this measure, then, potential demand in northern cities easily exceeded that of some southern counties. The second problem is the large number of department stores in some of the places hit hardest by unemployment (including Durham and Northumberland) and conversely the poor provision in Midland counties where there was generally less than one department store per 100,000 inhabitants (Table 1). This paucity is at odds with the region's relative economic buoyancy in the inter-war period: unemployment rates were low and a number of local industries were developing rapidly, nurturing a skilled manual workforce and a growing white-collar sector. Conditions would thus appear to have favoured the emergence of department stores (like Lewis's) serving working and lower-middle class customers, yet numbers remained modest. Lancaster notes that 'Brummies seem to have preferred arcades to large stores', a predilection which he puts down to the 'small business culture of Birmingham'.<sup>24</sup> Such arguments are both reductionist and misleading. On the one hand, Birmingham itself was quite well served, with at least seven department stores by 1930;<sup>25</sup> on the other, Leicestershire, Derbyshire and Staffordshire, which were similarly poorly supplied, each had different urban, economic and social characteristics. This links to a third problem with a simple north-south divide: the considerable variation within regions. Thus, for example, Buckinghamshire and Essex were both poorly served in comparison with neighbouring counties, whilst the North Riding and Worcestershire were comparatively well supplied compared with their neighbours (Table 1).

Regional distributions were strongly influenced by the presence of large towns. Places like Newcastle, Sheffield, Leeds, Norwich, Portsmouth and Brighton not only contained large numbers of stores, but also several prestigious shops which were of regional rather than simply local significance. In Newcastle, for example, Fenwick's built on its reputation as a centre of fashionable design in a store constructed along Parisian lines, whilst Manchester's Kendal, Milne and Co. laid claim to being the largest department store outside London.<sup>26</sup> An important factor here was transport, which Pasdermadjian sees as fundamental to the emergence and spread of department stores.<sup>27</sup> Crucial in the early twentieth century was the electric tram, which linked growing suburbs to city centres. Jon Stobart has demonstrated their importance in shaping the retail geography of Stoke-on-Trent and, more specifically, Bainbridge's in Newcastle boasted in 1912 that 2500 trams passed their door each day.<sup>28</sup>

It is no surprise, then, that the distribution of department stores mapped quite closely onto the urban hierarchy, at least at the upper end (Table 2). Although the precise ranking of towns varied, the biggest

fifteen towns all featured amongst the top 25 in terms of department store provision. Below this, however, the relationship becomes less certain, with only two of the next ten biggest towns being prominent as centres of department store retailing.

[Table 2 here]

Some smaller towns were surprisingly well served in terms of department stores. These were generally county towns or resorts, although by no means all such places fostered development to the same extent. Bournemouth stands out amongst the resorts as being particularly well served; it had seven shops which we might recognise as department stores, including Beale's, Plummer Roddis, and Bobby & Co. Ltd. As Lancaster notes, the south coast developed a 'necklace of department stores', from Bobby's in Margate, via Bennett's in Weymouth, to Spooner's in Plymouth, drawing on a clientele of well-to-do holidaymakers.<sup>29</sup> However, his argument that department stores were integral to the development of such resorts is made problematic by the fact that they were fewer and rather less prominent in resorts on the east coast. Apart from Scarborough, with W. Boyes & Co., W. Rowntree & Sons Ltd., and its branch of Marshall & Snelgrove, sea-side towns from Skegness to Cromer to Southend-on-Sea appear to have had just one department store apiece. Similarly county towns such as Gloucester and Reading were well supplied, both in quantitative and qualitative terms: McIlroy's Reading store being considered to be the largest department store in the south, outside London.<sup>30</sup> With county towns, however, the divide was not clearly drawn along geographical lines: Salisbury had just one definite department store and Chelmsford only two, whereas Carlisle contained several, most notably a branch of Binns which was, unusually, described in the 1934 directory as a 'modern department store'.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, some department stores in smaller centres attracted customers from a wide geographical area. Brown's of Chester, for example, not only drew a wealthy clientele from amongst the gentry and middle classes of rural Cheshire, but also from the prosperous suburbs of the Wirral: well within the apparent hinterland of Liverpool stores. The attraction was partly Brown's upmarket image and partly the quintessential 'Englishness' of the city, with its black-and-white timbered buildings and ancient rows. As one customer put it: 'the ladies of the household of what were known as the Merchant Princes of Liverpool would prefer a shopping day involving a run in the car through the Wirral to the always ancient and interesting city of Chester, rather than to the ferry crossing of the River Mersey'.<sup>32</sup> This again highlights the importance of transport to the development of the department store. Moreover, it challenges Pasdermadjian's assertion that stores in smaller town often struggled in the interwar years as they tried to serve all classes. Chester was not a small town, but neither was it a big city, and it thrived largely on the basis of its links to the surrounding countryside. Stores like Brown's prospered by tapping into that hinterland, providing high levels of service and perhaps maintaining an aura of exclusivity – points to which we shall return later.

Brown's also highlights the balance between competition and complementarity in department store provision. Market areas could overlap considerably, partly by stores serving a different clientele and

partly because customers might patronise different stores according to the goods being sought and the particular occasion. Brown's might offer an attractive excursion, but Liverpool's department stores picked up much of the regular business of the wealthy and geographically mobile residents of the Wirral. The ways in which it was in competition with other Chester shops shifted over time as it increasingly sought out what its then chairman called 'the C class of customer': artisan and lower middle-class groups who also shopped in multiples, independents and perhaps even at the market.<sup>33</sup> Brown's took some, but by no means all of their custom, a reminder that the same people could buy from department stores and multiples; class did not determine shopping behaviour. At a broader scale, there is little evidence of a shadow around larger cities, even London; if anything, there appears to have been a positive influence, both in suburbs like Kingston and Croydon and further afield in Hertfordshire and Berkshire, with their high department store to population ratio.

[Table 3 here]

In contrast to the importance of relatively small towns like Chester, some large centres appear to have been poorly provided for in terms of department stores. Of those appearing in Table 2, Coventry, Birkenhead, Wolverhampton, Ilford, Gateshead and Stockport stand out. Each had just one definite department store, that in Stockport being the Co-operative central store on Chestergate. To this list might be added a string of other industrial towns: Barnsley, Chesterfield, Dewsbury and Burton-on-Trent all had populations of 50,000 or more, yet in none can a department store be positively identified (although all contain 'possible' stores). Such 'under-served' towns were not evenly spread across the country; rather they were concentrated into the Midlands and north. As Table 3 shows, *per capita* provision was much lower in northern than in southern towns, well over one-third of towns in the Midlands and north falling into the lowest quintile of provision *per capita*, whilst only one-in-ten were in the highest quintile. In contrast, the figures for southern towns were one-in-ten and one quarter respectively. The residents of southern England were clearly much better provided in terms of department stores than their cousins in the north. This may have been due to the traditional strength of Co-operative retailing in these places or the continued attraction of the market hall, which was more pronounced in the north and west. However, we should be cautious about such supply-led explanations: the different nature of urban development also played a role. By their very nature, large industrial towns might have a relatively large number of department stores but only a low provision *per capita*. This is clearly the case in towns such as Leeds, Bradford, Hull and Sheffield, each of which had at least five department stores, but ratios of less than one store per 50,000 inhabitants. There is a stark contrast between these and the small market towns in the south: a single department store in towns like Harpenden (Anscombe & Sons Ltd), Minehead (Floyd & Sons) and Devizes (Charles Sloper & Sons) could mean ratios as low as 1:3000. Of course, these were very different shops from the likes of Schofield's in Leeds, Brown, Muff in Bradford, or the Co-op City Stores in Sheffield. They were much smaller businesses, both in terms of turnover and premises and formed the



type of store that Scott and Walker suggest suffered from much lower levels of productivity and profitability in the 1930s.<sup>34</sup> They were, nonetheless, department stores of a kind – a point which underlines Bertramsen's warning that we should not view the department store as a monolithic type.<sup>35</sup> Yet town size and type were clearly not the only explanations for variations in provision per capita: the shopping habits of the local population were also important.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, it is notable that industrial towns in the north east appear to have had a greater tradition of department store retailing than those in Yorkshire. Certainly, their ratio of stores to customers was two or three times lower. Such differences require us to delve further into the origins and development of department stores in different parts of the country.

### **The changing distribution of department stores**

Tracing the provincial department stores identified for the 1930s back through the trade directories reveals much about their changing numbers and distribution. A sample of 23 counties, chosen to provide a broad geographical spread and incorporating some 213 department stores in the 1930s, shows that all but thirteen were trading in some capacity in the 1910s. Some appear to have changed little in the scale and nature of their trading between the two dates. For example, Heelas, Sons & Co. Ltd. of Reading were described in the directories as 'drapers, outfitters, complete house furnishers, house agents & auctioneers' both in 1915 and 1931, and they occupied the same plot on Broad Street. Similarly, Binns of Sunderland were already in possession of their Fawcett Street premises in 1914, although they were listed simply as 'drapers' rather than the more expansive 'H. Binns, Son & Co. Ltd. for everything; funerals furnished, night service; motor showrooms; drapers' that appeared in 1934.<sup>37</sup> Most stores, however, were in smaller or different premises, operated simpler business arrangements, and appeared to offer a rather narrower range of goods in the 1910s.

The gradual expansion of many stores makes it difficult to judge at what point they might be regarded as department stores: when had a draper's shop, for example, developed sufficiently in terms of stock range, business organisation and scale of operation to cross the threshold? Some, like Evans & Owen of Bath, Brown Muff of Bradford, or Lilley's of Cambridge had clearly been operating in this manner for many decades. Others were established *ab initio* as department stores in the early twentieth century, a process which might be seen as the tail end of what Shaw terms the 'revolutionary' phase of department store development, the early stages in the establishment of modern department store chains, or the result of a consolidation of Co-operative trading into a Central Store.<sup>38</sup> With most emerging department stores, however, things are less certain, especially when corroborative evidence is less clear-cut. With that proviso in mind, adopting a similar methodology to that used to identify stores in the early 1930s indicates that perhaps 60 per cent of the sample shops were operating as department stores by this date.<sup>39</sup> Extrapolating this figure for the country as a whole suggests that there

might have been about 300 department stores at this date: a total well in excess of Jefferys' estimated 175-225.<sup>40</sup> If correct, this places greater emphasis on the late nineteenth century, rather than the early twentieth, as a period of rapid growth in department store numbers. Indeed, this makes considerable sense: given the uncertain times faced by many department stores in the 1920s, it seems unlikely that they would have almost trebled in number in the twenty years after 1914.<sup>41</sup>

Department stores were not only more numerous at this earlier date; they were also spread widely across the country (Table 4). Figures for individual counties varied quite markedly: in Cambridgeshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire, the admittedly small number of department stores recorded in 1932 were already trading as such by about 1912. In contrast, well over half of those in Berkshire, Cumberland and Lincolnshire only made the jump to department store trading after this date. Yet these differences were not systematic in any socio-economic or regional sense. There were similar proportions in southern counties with large numbers of resort-town department stores (for example, Sussex); in northern counties with concentrations of industrial towns (Durham and Northumberland); and in predominantly rural counties, with a scattering of market and commuter towns (Somerset and Hertfordshire). Moreover, the regional pattern showed considerable stability. This suggests that the underlying factors determining the distribution of department stores changed relatively little in the early twentieth century, reflecting the way in which different types of stores were emerging in different places to serve the local clientele. Thus, Brown, Muff & Co. in Bradford, like Brown's in Chester, catered for the bourgeois taste of the county and industrial elite; Beales in Bournemouth attracted well-to-do holidaymakers; Fenwick's in Newcastle sold to a wide range of customers, from the upper to the working classes, and Shepherd's in Gateshead actively sought out working class customers through a network of neighbourhood agents.<sup>42</sup> Again, it is clear that provincial department stores were far from being a monolithic type and that a variety of business models could prove successful.

[Table 4]

This diversity was underpinned by the growth of Co-operative central stores. Co-ops invariably had numerous branches scattered across town, but in many places they also established central emporia which amounted to *de facto* department stores selling a wide range of goods. Lancaster argues that many city centre co-operatives retained a system of separate units – sometimes, as in Leicester, behind a single façade – reflecting, in part, a mistrust of the frivolous and wasteful consumption seen as characterising department stores. However, the early twentieth century saw two important developments which shifted Co-operative Societies firmly into department store retailing. First was the growth of new purpose-built premises for these central stores, which often consciously mirrored styles used in department stores. That of the Gateshead Industrial Co-operative Society (1925-26) had echoes of Selfridges' Oxford Street store, whilst the central store of the Newcastle Co-operative Society Limited (built in 1929) was a fine example of art deco design.<sup>43</sup> Second, there was a shift in

attitudes to modes of shopping. Advertising the opening of its new 'Arcadia' in 1928, Ashton-under-Lyne Co-operative Society proudly announced that 'all your shopping can now be done under one roof in the atmosphere of an Exhibition building'.<sup>44</sup> Such stores were especially common in industrial districts – there were at least ten Co-op 'department stores' in the West Riding and five in County Durham by 1930 – but they were also an important aspect of the department store sector outside such areas. The Central Store of Lincoln Co-operative Society operated as a proto-department store from its construction in 1873, although it retained the typical internal divisions into the twentieth century. In Chester, the central store offered the usual range of goods – here within a single unit – and included a café on the first floor.

Tracing stores further back, into the nineteenth century, the status of individual shops becomes even more difficult to judge outside the well-documented and probably atypical big stores. Shaw's sample of west Midland towns reveals just five department stores and eleven 'part department stores' in 1870, rising to twenty-five and thirty-seven respectively by 1910.<sup>45</sup> Expressed differently, this meant that about one-fifth of the department stores found in 1910 were trading in this capacity forty years earlier. Such growth, he argued, mirrored that in London, with only a short time lag. Taking a small sample of different types and sizes of town from across the country allows us to extrapolate Shaw's findings spatially (see Table 5) and suggests that as many as half of those identified in the 1930s were already department stores in the 1890s. Even if this is an over-estimate, it appears that the period 1870-1890 was crucial in the emergence of provincial department stores – a suggestion borne out by the experience of larger stores: John Walsh, Fenwick's, Brown, Muff & Co., Beale's, Lewis's and Owen Owen, amongst many others, all trace their origins as department stores to the 1870s and 1880s, the revolutionary phase of Shaw's two-stage model.<sup>46</sup> In his sample, it was large or fashionable towns that led the way, drawing on demand from the expanding industrial bourgeoisie and respectable working classes on the one hand, and from a wealthy leisured class on the other. This suggestion certainly fits well with broader understandings of the segmented clientele of department stores, but the data presented in Table 5 indicate that early department store development was most apparent in larger towns, regardless of their location or economic function. Sunderland and Brighton stand out, despite being very different kinds of town, whilst the provision of department stores in Leamington Spa is very much in line with that in Carlisle despite their contrasting socio-economic characteristics and very different hinterlands. All these are distinct from the small market or industrial towns – Newark, Northwich and Devizes – where department stores came later and were much fewer in number.

Added to this is the different magnitude of the stores in these various towns. Store frontage is a crude measure of size and is subject to variables such as the plot width (the narrow plots in Carlisle, for example, tend to exaggerate somewhat the size of its stores, although Binn's, Bullough's and the Co-operative Central Store all occupied substantial premises), but it offers the opportunity to compare stores across time and space. Unsurprisingly, almost all department stores in the sample grew

considerably in size, roughly doubling their mean frontage between the 1890s and 1930s (Table 5). That said, stores were noticeably bigger in larger centres, particularly by the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, William Hill had premises stretching from 48-61 Western Road in Hove, whilst in Sunderland Blackett & Sons occupied 241-246 High Street West as well as the substantial Blackett's Buildings on adjoining Union Street. In contrast, the premises of Bobby's on the corner of The Parade and Bedford Street in Leamington Spa were just six frontages wide; those of were Brown's of Chester were smaller still, despite the prestigious nature of the store, although it did trade over three floors.

[Table 5 here]

All this suggests that department stores came earlier and were generally larger in the bigger towns – much as we might expect. However, it would be a mistake to assume that, as an innovatory retail form, they spread hierarchically from larger to smaller towns. Their appearance in many small county and industrial towns reflected largely endogenous and organic growth, with most department stores emerging from pre-existing businesses that gradually expanded their lines of business and their premises. The creation of *ab initio* stores usually took the form of a new Co-operative central store (although even here Societies were already trading in the town) or a branch of an existing store elsewhere. Lewis's was one of the first stores to do this, opening branches in Manchester, Birmingham and, less successfully, Sheffield in the 1880s to cater for the growing demand from an increasingly well-paid urban workforce.<sup>47</sup> A decade later, Bobby's was spreading along the south coast, taking advantage of the market provided by holiday-makers by opening stores in a number of seaside resorts. By the early twentieth century, Doggarts, Binns and Robinsons in northeast England, McIlroys in the South, Featherstones in Kent, and Plummer Roddis on the south coast were also establishing regional networks, including stores in both large and small towns (Table 6). These were genuine networks, reflecting the organic growth of regional companies, rather than the predatory programmes of acquisition undertaken by Selfridges, the Drapery and General Investment Trust and, later, Debenhams, John Lewis and United Drapery Stores.<sup>48</sup> That said, the opening of a branch store did not necessarily mean a new department store was created. Lewis's constructed new stores, but later networks were constructed through a mixture of new stores and takeovers: Bobby's built stores in Torquay and Bournemouth, but took over Green & Son in Exeter;<sup>49</sup> Binn's usual policy was to open new stores, but in Carlisle the company bought out the established department store, Robinson Bros. Ltd, which boasted in a 1914 advertisement not only that it sold 'everything to wear' and 'everything for the home', but also that it had an 'electric lift to all floors'.<sup>50</sup>

[Table 6 here]

### **Plots, premises and fittings**

These take-overs were not simply a question of replacing one owner with another. Binn's took the opportunity to buy not just Robinson's premises in Carlisle (30-40 English Street), but also those of two neighbouring businesses: the drapers Martindale & Sons (at numbers 24-26), and a temperance hotel (number 22). The plot was thus considerably enlarged and with it the scope for expanding the business and rebuilding the premises. Such growth was typical of department stores in the early twentieth century. Systematic analysis is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is striking that over half of the 213 stores in the sample significantly enlarged their premises between the 1910s and the 1930s and, in doing so, literally built on the trend of previous decades. For example, in Hanley, the principal town in the Potteries region of north Staffordshire, Bratt & Dyke expanded from a double fronted shop, 49-51 Stafford Street, in 1892 to a substantial corner plot occupying 53-55 Stafford Street and 1-17 Trinity Street by 1912.<sup>51</sup> The attraction of such enlargement was twofold. First, it produced a plot large enough for the store to stock a wider range of goods and to organise these into separate departments – an structure which was emphasised in many advertisements placed by department stores in the early twentieth century. This could be achieved with minimal internal changes; indeed, Whiteley's in London famously comprised a series of distinct shops, inter-linked by a series of connecting doors and corridors. Similarly, the gradual growth of Brown's of Chester, coupled with the physical restrictions imposed by the rows, resulted in an interior comprising a series of disjointed and confusing spaces.<sup>52</sup>

Assembling a consolidated block of buildings also allowed comprehensive redevelopment to take place. Shaw has carefully traced this process for Beattie's of Wolverhampton and Morrison has done the same for the Co-op in Lincoln; but it was repeated up and down the country, sometimes facilitated by local authority street improvement schemes – the case for Kendal Milne in Manchester and Brown Muff in Bradford.<sup>53</sup> The result was the construction of some impressive buildings – often the largest and most striking in the city centre. These range from the seven story and 17 bay neo-baroque pile built for John Walsh's in Sheffield, to the so-called crystal palace of McIlroy's in Reading, with its continuous glass wall on the lower two floors, to the art deco splendour of Roddis House in Bournemouth.<sup>54</sup> And yet, looking across the full set of provincial department stores, it is clear that such monumental building programmes were exceptional; most provincial department stores had solid premises on quite modest sites – more in keeping with their surroundings and in tune with their clientele. In Chester, Brown's four-plot frontage was an assortment of different architectural designs, including neo-classical, neo-gothic, and black and white revival.<sup>55</sup> Even where rebuilding did occur, it was usually quite restrained. Brookfield's of Stafford redeveloped its corner plot c.1890 and remodelled the exterior with a unifying façade being built onto both Greengate Street and St Mary's Gate, but its scale and design ensured a balanced streetscape rather than overshadowing its neighbours. Much the same was true of Bratt & Dyke in Hanley, their new corner building, opened in 1897 and

known as 'The Central', was impressive but not over-bearing; it included three prominent gables carrying the building's name, its date of construction and heraldic imagery.<sup>56</sup>

The buildings and internal arrangement of department stores reflected their scale of operation and functional organisation; that is, large-scale businesses sub-divided into a series of distinct and often separately accounted departments selling different lines of goods. Like their metropolitan counterparts, the largest provincial stores matched a monumental exterior with grand and elegant interiors. Few, in any, could match the drama of the domed atria and luxurious use of materials and decorative detail seen in metropolitan stores.<sup>57</sup> Yet provincial stores deployed many of the same features: Wylie and Lochead in Glasgow and Lewis's in Birmingham had broad sweeping staircases to their galleried upper showrooms; others, like Brown Muff & Co in Bradford, had elegant columned showrooms, whilst a little later many purpose-built Co-operative Society Central Stores, including those at Newcastle and Sheffield, had impressive art deco interiors.<sup>58</sup> It seems that even an essentially working-class clientele needed to be impressed, not only by the size but also the quality of the department store: many of the fittings in the Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society's City Store in Sheffield were made of walnut and boxwood, and the stairs were of marble terrazzo.<sup>59</sup>

The impression of the provincial department store given by these impressive interiors is tempered by two considerations. First, many of these features were not new: Clare Walsh makes clear that many of the higher class shops of eighteenth-century London were introducing larger premises, lit by atria as they stretched further back from the street front and including various showrooms; by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, most provincial towns had a number of substantial emporia selling drapery, china and glassware or furniture from elegant showrooms.<sup>60</sup> Second, and conversely, many provincial department stores were simply too small to afford, accommodate or require these grand statements and spaces. In Stafford, Brookfield's new interior included a series of discrete departments for furnishings, millinery, drapery and clothing, as well as a tearoom; but all were modest in size and decoration. Similarly, the various showrooms of Woodward's in Leamington Spa were small and simply decorated, whilst the Empire Trading Stamp Co Ltd of Sheffield comprised a series of incredibly cramped rooms in 19-23 Howard Street. Images survive of thirteen different departments, from carpet and lino through enamelware to ladies and children's outfitting, plus a central accounting office; this was indubitably a department store.<sup>61</sup>

What characterised all these stores, large or small, was a separation of different categories of goods into distinct departments. In larger stores, each department had a separate manager and it was increasingly common for accounts to distinguish each department, allowing store owners to track the relative turnover of different lines and departments. For example, Broadbent's of Southport grew their business from £18,218 in 1892-93 to £27,570 in 1900-01, with perfumes and patent medicines accounting for around £2,900 of this turnover.<sup>62</sup> The accounts of Cockayne's in Sheffield, meanwhile, show gross profits for a total of 28 departments by 1914.<sup>63</sup> From the customers' perspective, these

departments were generally encountered as a series of spatially distinct units assembled under one roof. In each, the goods were displayed using a growing variety of techniques, many of them common to all department stores, but most with deep roots in earlier retail formats. Whitaker's argument that 'one of the biggest, most fundamental revolutions brought about by department stores had less to do with *how* they displayed merchandise than with the fact *that* they displayed it' reveals much about the myopic view that bedevils studies of department stores.<sup>64</sup> It ignores the large and growing body of research that demonstrates how English retailers in the eighteenth century were engaged in a whole range of techniques and deployed a variety of shop fittings to display their wares to customers.<sup>65</sup> Glass display cabinets feature in numerous eighteenth-century trade cards and inventories, yet their deployment was considerably extended in department stores, with provincial shops often following a metropolitan lead. Both as part of counters and as islands on the shop floor, they helped to highlight the allure of goods by placing them close to the shopper, yet tantalisingly out of reach.<sup>66</sup> Typically, glass counters were filled with smallwares, gloves, perfumes, jewellery and the like, all neatly arranged in piles and rows to create striking yet orderly display; those on the shop floor contained larger and more delicate items such as hats. Both of these can be seen in the drapery and millinery showrooms of Brookfield's (c.1910), and in many departments of the larger Co-op City Stores in Sheffield (1929).<sup>67</sup>

Rather slower to spread to smaller stores was a genuinely new display technique: the use of mannequins. In their original headless form, these were being used by Jolly & Son Ltd of Bath in the 1890s to display bridal gowns and a little later by Brown Muff & Co of Bradford in their ladies' costume department and by Mason & Sons Ltd of Ipswich – at least when setting out clothes for the camera.<sup>68</sup> They were found in smaller stores, such as E. Francis & Sons of Leamington Spa, by the early twentieth century, but again most often as headless figures – more like tailors' dummies.<sup>69</sup> More lifelike mannequins, of the kind being extensively deployed in metropolitan department stores from the 1910s, appear to have been slower to spread to smaller stores, most likely because of the cost involved. By the 1930s, however, they had penetrated even somewhat downmarket stores, such as the Empire Trading Stamp Co Ltd, whilst larger stores were building special mannequin display stands to create tableau within the store.<sup>70</sup>

Much more common in smaller stores was the flip-side of these elegant displays: a piling of goods on every available surface to create an image what Whitaker calls 'orderly profusion'.<sup>71</sup> Such an approach caused some consternation to American visitors who were warned in one guidebook not to be alarmed by finding 'things are so strewn about and piled up and hung up that it requires a "seeing eye" to pick out the good from the bad'.<sup>72</sup> Yet it characterised the key shop floors of fashionable Parisian stores such as Printemps, as well as the drapery and furniture departments of provincial shops like Brookfield's, Francis & Sons, and Bratt & Dyke. This resulted partly from the pressure to maximise sales from every square foot of floor space and from a desire to create a visually striking display of

goods that emphasised choice; but it also linked to the crowded space of the Victorian and Edwardian parlour – the cornucopia of the shop echoing that of the home.<sup>73</sup>

Perhaps the most striking feature of the selling spaces of London and provincial department stores, and one that linked them closely to preceding centuries of retail practice, was the persistence of the counter. Whilst much is made of the department store's importance in giving shoppers unmediated access to consumer goods, the counter and its concomitant sales assistant remained central to the structure and operation of department stores well into the twentieth century. This apparent contradiction owes something to the rhetoric of self-aggrandising owners such as Gordon Selfridge and something to the mistaken belief that the removal of partition walls and tall cabinets, and the introduction of open plan interiors also meant the removal of counters. Indeed, when they were ripped out from Whiteley's in the 1950s, there was such a protest from customers that the store was forced to abandon the policy.<sup>74</sup> The kind of open access to goods championed by American department stores was used by Lewis in his Manchester store, opened in 1880; instead of counters, there were boxes from which customers could help themselves to goods. He claimed that this was unique in Britain at that time, but as Briggs argues the practice harked back to the earlier bazaars.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, counter service remained important in many departments in Lewis's, despite the retailer's emphasis on serving the lower-middle and working classes. In many smaller stores, it persisted much longer. At the Empire Trading Stamp Co Ltd in the 1930s, all the departments included counters and chairs where customers sat whilst being served; they were surrounded by goods piled on shelves and on the floor and even hung from the ceiling, yet their focus is on the counter and the shop assistant. Such arrangements were perhaps unusual and may reflect the particular *modus operandi* of this shop, which appears to have sold in least in part through catalogues. Its cramped spaces strongly challenge our image of department stores – they are a world away from the dream-world of Parisian stores and even the elegant showrooms of John Walsh and the modernity of the Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society's City Stores, both just a few streets away. Whilst extreme, however, the Empire Trading Stamp Co Ltd was perhaps not so different from department stores across the country: seats were provided for customers in most departments of the Co-op's City Stores into the 1930s, as they were at Kendals, the foremost department store in Manchester. As late as the 1950s, the drapery and fashion accessories departments of Bratt & Dyke in Hanley retained seats for customers and counters from which they were served.<sup>76</sup>

There was a similar tension between traditional and innovative approaches in the use of window displays and street frontages. Again, we need to be wary of the hyperbole surrounding the dramatic changes wrought by department stores, especially away from metropolitan centres because shops had been displaying goods in glazed windows from the early eighteenth century. However, the easier availability and falling price of plate glass, added to an increasing willingness of the part of passers-by to look at shop windows, placed greater emphasis on the window as a key way of attracting people



into the shop.<sup>77</sup> Even away from the bright lights of London, these encouraged the remodelling of shop fronts to maximise display space and draw the gaze of the passerby. The modest double frontage of Charles Sloper's in Devizes, Wiltshire, was modernised in 1929 to incorporate: a recessed area on the ground floor, which allowed window-shoppers to browse under cover; a glazed display cabinet protruding out into the pavement, and a solid wall of window on the first floor designed to illuminate the showrooms behind but also display wares to those passing in omnibuses.<sup>78</sup> In Middlesbrough, Dickson & Benson took this further with what they advertised as 'the Arcade Store': a series of recessed fronts that ran the whole length of their premises on Linthorpe Road. The displays mounted in such windows varied considerably, but surviving images suggest that most provincial department stores retained a fairly traditional approach to window dressing through to the 1930s at least. This generally meant a window crowded with goods, albeit sometimes artfully arranged. In the 1920s, E. Francis & Sons of Leamington Spa dedicated a window to Jaeger wear, filling the space with corsets, petticoats, vests, dressing gowns and the suchlike; some were draped and others placed on headless mannequins. Notices attached to the windows declared fixed prices – a surprising indication that customers might still need reminding of such things at this late date. In other windows, they hung hats from the ceiling and draped lacework, feather boas and hosiery over poles, attaching price tickets to most of these goods. A decade later, the neighbouring store, Woodward's, was still happy to cram its double window on the Parade with a display of Wolsey underwear, mixing images of the Cardinal with piles of socks, draped vests and long-johns, and price tickets.<sup>79</sup> Again, these seem to occupy a separate world from the highly stylised and professionally dressed windows of Selfridge's or Harrods, but they appear to have typified provincial window displays until the post-war period. Only rarely was a more restrained or stylised approach adopted, as at Heelas in Reading, where a 1934 window display contained just eight full or half mannequins, dressed in the latest fashions.<sup>80</sup> Significantly, Co-operative Societies were amongst the more imaginative when it came to window dressing, metropolitan approaches being adopted in many Central Stores. In Sheffield, one window displayed a small selection of fabrics draped around a central mannequin and another presented women's shoes against an abstract starburst backdrop.<sup>81</sup>

### **Keeping the customer satisfied**

It is easy to over-emphasise the distinction between the metropolitan and provincial worlds; for all their sophistication, major stores could cling to what seem remarkably old-fashioned forms of selling. In Paris, the elegance and sophistication of the interiors and window displays of Printemps, Au Bon Marche and Samaritaine was juxtaposed and in some respects compromised by the presence around their main entrances of open stalls selling hats, umbrellas, ties and a range of textiles.<sup>82</sup> Conversely, the roof gardens and playgrounds, balloon launches and circus acts, reading rooms and concerts that characterised the great metropolitan stores found their reflection in similar attractions put on by

provincial department stores, often drawing on the practices of earlier bazaars. From 1913 Brown's of Chester held fashion shows featuring French models as well as French gowns. In the interwar years, Buntings of Norwich advertised that 'the orchestral trio plays daily from 12 to 6 p.m.', whilst Bobby's in Bournemouth hired music hall acts to appear at coffee mornings and teatime. In common with many stores, their local rivals Beale's hosted Father Christmas, but rather dramatically had him arrive by aeroplane. In Kingston, Bentall's had a Palm Court Orchestra, regular mannequin parades and bonny baby competitions; each year they displayed the flowers from the Royal Box at Ascot and held a circus for the children at Christmas; they also exhibited Donald Campbell's *Bluebird* and hired a Swedish girl who climbed a ladder to the top of the central well before diving 20 metres into a tank of water.<sup>83</sup>

More prosaically, but far more important on a day-to-day basis, many provincial stores incorporated rest rooms and tearooms. The former were seen as important additions to London stores in the 1870s since a 'Day's Shopping is one of the most agreeable occupations a Lady can devise, but pleasure is toil without agreeable relaxation and rest'. Moreover, it was argued that their absence might cut into profits because 'sheer weariness, the necessity of rest, and the desire to arrange the toilet not infrequently shorten the visit'.<sup>84</sup> Tearooms, meanwhile, became a fixture even in smaller stores and Co-operative Central Stores – there were three separate tearooms plus a private dining room at the Co-op City Stores in Sheffield. Unsurprisingly, the rooms in small provincial stores like Brookfield's could not match the elegance of Liberty's Moorish restaurant or even the art nouveau rooms at Mawer & Collingham in Lincoln, but they still served the need for refreshment and offered a potential meeting place. Indeed, the possibility of tearooms and the department store more generally being a place of rendezvous was highlighted in an advertisement run by Bainbridge's of Newcastle in the early twentieth century, which took the opportunity to highlight several of the store's departments:

'We are pleased to find that many Ladies make our Warehouse a place of meeting in 'Town'. It is very central, and in any case a place of call, and it is big enough to be private! Of course, the *spot of meeting* should always be named – The 'Blouse' Room! The 'Millinery'! The 'Flower and Perfume' Gallery! The 'Ladies Outfitting' Room? The 'Tea Room'. Any other of the magnetic points in our Huge Emporium'.<sup>85</sup>

This emphasis on the customer experience is significant as it was central to the efforts of department stores, especially those in the provinces, to distinguish themselves from a growing array of chain stores that threatened to draw away much of their business. Customer service, as well as keen prices on a wide range of goods, was an important part of the attraction of department stores – particularly, but not only, those targeting middle-class customers. Having facilities such as tea rooms and rest rooms was part of the answer, as was the kind of elaborate entertainments laid on by Bentall's, which enjoyed record profits and built a new store despite the difficult trading conditions in the 1930s.<sup>86</sup> More important, however, was the need to make the customer feel welcome and free to wander around

the store – a central tenet of the department store, if not the revolutionary change in retail practice that it is often portrayed as being. Concerns were raised in the trade press and elsewhere about the Parisian system of walk-around stores, not least because of the moral threat it posed to female customers, the danger of shoplifting and the risk of male customers becoming overly familiar with female assistants;<sup>87</sup> but there was also a growing fascination with American techniques of store organisation, which was predicated on the free movement of customers.

A widespread criticism of upmarket British stores, especially amongst visitors from the USA, was the use of floorwalkers. Ideally, these would make the middle-class customer welcome at the door and escort them politely between departments. Such practices were anathema to American shoppers who complained that this restricted browsing and that ‘you are made to feel uncomfortable if you do not buy’.<sup>88</sup> It was also inappropriate in those provincial stores where the core clientele was drawn from the lower-middle and working classes. Yet there was clearly a strong perception that stores did not encourage browsing; even without floorwalkers, pushy assistants would badger customers into buying and were encouraged to promote slow-moving lines. Numerous provincial department stores advertised their openness to casual shoppers, Robinson’s of Carlisle, for example, declaring in a 1914 advertisement that not only was it ‘The store that gives “The most of the best for the least money” – always’, but also that ‘Visitors are cordially invited to walk around’.<sup>89</sup> A few years earlier, Fenwick’s of Newcastle had announced ‘a welcome to customers to walk around the store. Assistants are not allowed to speak to visitors. Walk around today, don’t buy. There is time for that another day’.<sup>90</sup> This freedom of movement was clearly popular – customer numbers grew from 295 to over 3,000 per day in just a year – perhaps because it tapped into established practices of browsing in bazaars, arcades and market halls. However, the ‘silent assistant’ was not taken up by many other stores, sometimes because of reticence or prejudice amongst senior staff. The *Mass Observation* study of Brown’s of Chester in the 1940s found that one floorwalker was willing to accept the ‘best artisan type’, but hoped that ‘we’ll never go down to the lowest’. The restaurant manager was even less certain, worried about the tendency for working-class people to ‘eat with their knives’. Some customers were also worried about a potential move down-market, one complaining that ‘nowadays, you meet the people from the back streets there’; but others still saw it as exclusive, maintaining that ‘I never go to Browns, I leave that to the toffs’.<sup>91</sup>

For all this, Brown’s was clearly a place in transition and, for a growing number of working-class women, it was a place to go, especially if a particular item was required. One woman noted that:

‘If you want a blouse I should definitely try Browns. I know it looks very smart from the outside, but inside, you’d be surprised, it’s not very expensive. It’s not more expensive than any other shop, and it is one of the best. *The best* really, I should say. I was in there myself yesterday buying a dress length. You go in. Don’t be afraid. People say the

assistants there are nicer than anywhere else. They're so helpful, you see. You go in and wander round. You don't have to buy anything'.<sup>92</sup>

The last phrase is quite striking and reveals that, even in the 1940s, there was a lingering feeling that department stores were not places where you could wander freely. Nonetheless, *Mass Observation* recorded that 60 percent of Brown's customers were from the artisan class and 11 percent from the unskilled working class; the report also observed that women from socio-economic class C 'now wander about as if they own the place'.<sup>93</sup> This does not mean that these customers did all or most of their shopping in Browns; but it reminds us that shopping behaviour was contingent on many things, including product and occasion. The respondent quoted above particularly mentioned buying blouses and material for dresses; equally, Kendal's in Manchester might have been too exclusive for every day, but could still be a resort for Christmas presents.

## Conclusions

This paper has attempted to recover something of the geography, layout and experience of ordinary department stores in provincial England in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. That a geographical survey has not previously been attempted can, perhaps, be attributed to problems of definition and evidence. Yet charting the spread and distribution of department stores is an essential prerequisite to any valid assessment of the central role they are seen as having played in transforming British retailing. Thus, whilst the conclusions that we might draw from data which are the product of judgments as to what constitutes a department store must be treated with caution, both the process and the outcome are of considerable significance to retail history. With this in mind, three main points emerge.

The first is that department stores, as defined here, were more numerous and widespread by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century than has previously been suggested. They were present in many small towns with just a few thousand inhabitants, and in considerable numbers in the large conurbations and principal county and resort towns. Moreover, there was a distinct regional and local geography to their distribution: the south was better provided per capita than the north and, within this, the north east for example was better provided than was Yorkshire. However, whilst we have an increasingly detailed picture of where department stores were to be found, the underlying causes of what was often a highly variegated distribution defy any simple explanation. Patterns of demand varied according to the class of customer targeted and shifted over time as towns grew or local economies thrived or struggled. Supply-side factors were even more complex and localised. There was growing competition from multiples because even shops like Browns of Chester were increasingly targeting the same set of customers from lower social groups, albeit perhaps for different aspects of their household spending. Moreover, an expanding retail sector could also draw in customers from

neighbouring towns as could an individual store, like Brown's, which also enjoyed a good reputation amongst the geographically mobile.

In part arising from this wide distribution across a varied set of towns, is my second point: that department stores were not a single monolithic type. Obvious contrasts might be drawn between grand metropolitan and more workaday provincial stores, both in terms of technology, management organisation, profitability and productivity (points emphasised by Scott and Walker) and also the scale of premises, shopping environment and customer experience. Yet provincial stores were extraordinarily varied, which in part explains contemporary and present-day problems of (self-) identification. It would be hard to find a working definition to cover shops as varied as Brown's in Chester, Lewis's in Liverpool, Fenwick's in Newcastle, Brookfield's in Stafford, and Sloper's in Devizes; yet all were seen as department stores by those using them. More significantly, perhaps, the very different nature of these shops meant that the experiences and meanings of shopping in department stores were equally varied and contingent upon local circumstances and the historical development of retailing a particular town. Brookfield's, for example, clearly drew on a different type of clientele from a store like Brown's or John Walsh's, let alone Harrods or Selfridges: shopping in these stores involved different behavioural codes and had very different social implications.

This links to the third point: since most department stores grew organically, drawing on growing local demand and gradually adding new products and services to those already offered, department stores during this period might be best seen in terms of retail evolution rather than revolution. This was true of both London and provincial department stores, and is revealed both through business practices and the changing use of internal space and shop fittings.<sup>94</sup> These reveal some important developments that underscore the role of the department store in the transformation of both retailing and consumption, but also long-term continuities with earlier retail practices. Despite a degree of conservatism amongst some store owners and customers, the potential of display and unmediated access to goods was certainly opened up more fully by the practices of provincial stores. Yet customer service remained central to the ethos and identity of department stores, even those servicing working-class customers; it helped to distinguish them from the growing number of multiple retailers that crowded Britain's high streets from the late nineteenth century onwards, even where investment in new technology and management structures was lacking. In order to properly understand the role of the provincial department store, much more work is needed on their retail practices and their business organisation, as well as the character of their shop floors and the experience of their customers. This means drawing back from the more phantasmagorical accounts of London and Parisian stores and exploring in more detail the ways in which provincial shoppers viewed and used local department stores.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, the discussion of Whitley's in Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure. Women in the making of London's West End*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000, passim.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Pasdermadjian, *The Department Store: its Origins, Evolution and Economics*. London: Newman Books, 1954, esp. 3-7; Jan Whitaker, *The Department Store: History, Design, Display*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Pasdermadjian, *Department Store*; James Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954; Gareth Shaw, 'The evolution and impact of large-scale retailing in Britain', in *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, ed. John Benson and Gareth Shaw, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992, 139-53; Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store. A Social History*, Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1995; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*; Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops and Shopping. An Architectural History*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003; Peter Scott and James Walker, 'The British "failure" that never was? The "productivity gap" in large scale interwar retailing – evidence from the department store sector', *Economic History Review*, 65:1 (2012), 277-303.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Proctor, 'Constructing the retail monument: the Parisian department store and its property, 1855-1914', *Urban History*, 33 (2006), 393-410, quotation from 393. See also Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities. Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siecle Paris*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998, 16-26.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Michael Miller, *The Bon Marché: Bourgeois Culture and the Department Store, 1869-1920*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981, 177. See also Rosalind Williams, *Dream Worlds. Mass Consumption in Late Nineteenth Century France*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982; Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, London: Routledge, 1985; Mica Nava, 'Modernity's disavowal. Women, the city and the department store', in *Modern Times. Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, ed. Mica Nava and Alan O'Shea, London: Routledge, 1996; Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, 'The world of the department store: distribution, culture and social change', in *Cathedrals of Consumption. The European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 1-45; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*.

<sup>6</sup> Jeane Lawrence, 'Geographical space, social space, and the realm of the department store', *Urban History*, 19 (1992), 64-83

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, David Chaney, 'The department store as a cultural form', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1:3 (1983), 22-31; Nava, 'Modernity's disavowal'. For a counter argument, see Ian Mitchell, 'The Victorian provincial department store: a category too many?', *History of Retailing and Consumption*, 1:2 (2015), 149-63.

<sup>8</sup> Helen Bertramsen, 'What was a department store? Defining Victorian commercial space', Pre-publications of the English Department of Odense University (1999), 11; Lawrence, 'Geographical space'. See also Helen Bertramsen, 'Remoulding the city. Municipal improvements and the department store', in *A Nation of Shopkeepers. Five Centuries of British Retailing*, ed., John Benson and Laura Ugolini, London: Tauris, 2003; Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing in Britain', 139-53.

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Claire Walsh, 'The newness of the department store: a view from the eighteenth century', in *Cathedrals of Consumption: the European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 46-71; Mitchell, 'Victorian provincial department store'.

<sup>10</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 140. For examples of store histories, see: Asa Briggs, *Friends of the People. The Centenary History of Lewis's*, London: Batsford, 1956; Maurice Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters: Debenhams, 1778-1978*, London: Hutchinson, 1978; Michael Moss and Alison Turton, *A Legend in Retailing: House of Fraser*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1989.

<sup>11</sup> Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 326; Scott and Walker, 'The British "failure"', 284.

<sup>12</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 140; Nikolaus Pevsner, *A History of Building Types*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, 267.

<sup>13</sup> H.G. Wells, *The History of Mr Polly*, London, 1910, .9.

<sup>14</sup> Scott and Walker, 'The British "failure"', 296.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Markus, *Buildings and Power*, London: Routledge, 1993, especially 308; Whitaker, *Department Store*.

<sup>16</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 140. For a similar study of German department stores, see Tim Coles, 'Department stores as retail innovations in Germany: a historical-geographical perspective on the period 1870 to 1914', in *Cathedrals of Consumption: the European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 72-96.

<sup>17</sup> *Kelly's Directories* were not published for every county in a given year, so the date closest to 1932 was selected.

<sup>18</sup> Gareth Shaw, 'The content and reliability of nineteenth-century trade directories', *Local Historian*, 13 (1978), 205-09.

<sup>19</sup> Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 325-6.

<sup>20</sup> Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 59.

<sup>21</sup> Scott and Walker, 'The British "failure"', 296.

<sup>22</sup> See Brian Robson, 'The years between', in Robert Dodgshon and Robin Butlin, *An Historical Geography of England and Wales*, London: Academic Press, second edition, 1990, 545-78.

<sup>23</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 11. See also Geoffrey Crossick, 'The emergence of the lower middle class in Britain: a discussion', in *The Lower Middle Class in Britain*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick, London: Croom Helm Ltd, 1977, 19-20.

<sup>24</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 38.

<sup>25</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 143 suggests that there were eight 'full' department stores in Birmingham in 1910.

<sup>26</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 25-31.

<sup>27</sup> Pasdermadjian, *Department Store*, 24-5, 43-4.

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- <sup>28</sup> Jon Stobart, 'City centre retailing in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Stoke-on-Trent: structures and processes', in John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds) *A Nation of Shopkeepers. Five Centuries of British Retailing*, London: I.B. Tauris, 2003, 155-78; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 13.
- <sup>29</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 36. Broadbent's in Southport prospered serving a similar clientele – see J. Porter, 'The development of a provincial department store 1870-1939', *Business History*, 13 (1971), 64-71.
- <sup>30</sup> Morrison, *English Shops*, 171.
- <sup>31</sup> *Kelly's Directory*, 1934.
- <sup>32</sup> Mass Observation (ed.) H.D. Whitlock, *Brown's of Chester. A Portrait of a Shop*, London: Lindsay Drummond Ltd, 1947, 181. See also Lancaster, *Department Store*, 32-4.
- <sup>33</sup> Mass Observation, *Brown's of Chester*, 212-17.
- <sup>34</sup> Scott and Walker, 'The British "failure"', 301-2.
- <sup>35</sup> Bertramsen, 'What was a department store?', 11
- <sup>36</sup> Morrison, *English Shops*, 142; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 38-9. See also Margaret MacKeith, *Shopping Arcades: A Gazetteer of Extant British Arcades, 1817-1939*, London: Mansell Publishing, 1985, 12-16, 70-75.
- <sup>37</sup> *Kelly's Directory*, 1934.
- <sup>38</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 140; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 89-93.
- <sup>39</sup> This figure includes several stores, such as Keddies in Southend and Stones in Romford, which Lancaster suggests only passed this threshold in the 1920s – see Lancaster, *Department Store*, 103.
- <sup>40</sup> Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 59.
- <sup>41</sup> See Lancaster, *Department Store*, 85-93, 103; Pasdermadjian, *Department Store*, 46-9.
- <sup>42</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 99, 119-20.
- <sup>43</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 88-9; Morrison, *English Shops*, 146-55.
- <sup>44</sup> Souvenir Calendar, Ashton Co-operative Society, 1928: quoted in Morrison, *English Shops*, 153.
- <sup>45</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 143. Part department stores were defined by Jefferys as those with fewer than four distinct departments and were viewed as transitional stage to 'full' department store status, although that development could, of course, be arrested: Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 325-6.
- <sup>46</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 140.
- <sup>47</sup> Briggs, *Friends of the People*, chapters 3 and 4.
- <sup>48</sup> See Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 326-9; Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters*, 92-114; Gordon Honeycombe, *Selfridges: Seventy-Five Years: The Story of the Store, 1909-1983*, London: Selfridges Ltd, 1984, 59-60; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 85-93; Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 283.
- <sup>49</sup> In an echo of Beale's transformation in Bournemouth, Green & Son were listed in the 1914 *Kelly's Directory* as 'newspaper office, confectioner and stationer'.
- <sup>50</sup> *Kelly's Directory*, 1914.
- <sup>51</sup> *Kelly's Directory*, 1914, 1932.
- <sup>52</sup> Richard Morriss and Ken Hoverd, *The Buildings of Chester*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1993, 28, 105-6.

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<sup>53</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 143-5; Morrison, *English Shops*, 147-8, 171-2; Mitchell 'Provincial department stores'. See also Porter, 'Provincial department store'; Bertramsen, 'Remoulding commercial space'.

<sup>54</sup> Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 287-365; Morrison, *English Shops*, 147.

<sup>55</sup> Morriss, and Hoverd, *Buildings of Chester*, 28, 105-6.

<sup>56</sup> *Staffordshire Past Track*, Bratt & Dyke Department Store, Hanley, 1897 (viewed, 10 June 2016): <http://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=27562&PageIndex=1&KeyWord=department%20store&SortOrder=2>. The building was remodelled in 1937 to include a third storey of showrooms.

<sup>57</sup> See Whitaker, *Department Store*.

<sup>58</sup> Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*; Morrison, *English Shops and Shopkeeping*, 153-5. For French comparisons, see Catherine Coley, 'Les Magasins Reunis: from the provinces to Paris, from art nouveau to art deco', in *Cathedrals of Consumption: the European Department Store, 1850-1939*, ed., Geoffrey Crossick and Serge Jaumain, Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999, 225-51

<sup>59</sup> *Picture Sheffield*: Millinery Displays, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, 1929 (viewed, 10 June 2016): [http://www.picturesheffield.com/frontend.php?keywords=Ref\\_No\\_increment;EQUALS;s11227&pos=159&action=zoom&id=14242](http://www.picturesheffield.com/frontend.php?keywords=Ref_No_increment;EQUALS;s11227&pos=159&action=zoom&id=14242) ; Staircase, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, 1929 (viewed, 10 June 2016):

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<sup>60</sup> Walsh, 'Newness of the department store'; Morrison, *English Shops*, 125-32; William West, *History, Topography and Directory of Warwickshire*, Birmingham, 1830.

<sup>61</sup> See, for example, *Staffordshire Past Track*: Trunks and Cushions, Brookfield's Department Store, Stafford, c.1900-1910 (viewed, 10 June 2016): <http://www.search.staffspasttrack.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=2147&PageIndex=1&KeyWord=brookfield&SortOrder=2>; *Windows on Warwickshire*: Furniture display, Woodward's department store, Leamington Spa, 1958: (viewed, 10 June 2016):

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<sup>62</sup> Porter, 'Provincial department store', 282. Concession shops within the larger store were only introduced slowly from the USA in the 1930s – Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 149-51.

<sup>63</sup> Shaw, 'Large-scale retailing', 152.

<sup>64</sup> Whitaker, *Department Store*, 202.

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Walsh, 'Shop display'; Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman. A Study of Retailing, 1550-1820*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000, 76-115; Jon Stobart, Andrew Hann and Vicky Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*.

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*Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c.1660-1830*, London: Routledge, 2007, 123-32; Ian Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing, 1700 to 1850*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 219-52.

<sup>66</sup> Whitaker, *Department Store*, 210.

<sup>67</sup> *Staffordshire Past Tracks*: Dress and Fancy Departments, Brookfield's Department Store, Stafford, c.1900-1910 (viewed, 10 June 2016):

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<sup>68</sup> David Kindred, *Ipswich: A Second Selection*, Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1993, 33.

<sup>69</sup> Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 340, 295

<sup>70</sup> *Picture Sheffield*: Gentlemen's department, Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd., 1936 (viewed, 10 June 2016):

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<sup>71</sup> Whitaker, *Department Store*, 207.

<sup>72</sup> F. Waxmann, *A Shopping Guide to Paris and London* (1912), 3.

<sup>73</sup> See Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods. The British and their Possessions*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006, esp. 122-44

<sup>74</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 196.

<sup>75</sup> Briggs, *Friends of the People*, 66.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example: *Picture Sheffield*: China Department, Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd, 1936 (viewed, 10 June 2016):

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<sup>77</sup> Andrew Hann and Jon Stobart, 'Sites of consumption: the display of goods in provincial shops in eighteenth-century England', *Cultural and Social History*, 2 (2005); Morrison, *English Shops*, 41-65; Alan Powers, *Shop Fronts*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1989; Whitaker, *Department Store*, 172-99.

<sup>78</sup> Such features were already commonplace in larger stores, such as McIlroy's in Reading and John Walsh's in Sheffield.

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<sup>79</sup> *Windows on Warwickshire*: Shop window display, E. Francis & Sons, Leamington Spa. 1920s (viewed, 10 June 2016):

<http://www.search.windowsonwarwickshire.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=4188&PageIndex=1&KeyWord=shop%20window&SortOrder=2>; Window display, Woodward's department store, Leamington Spa, 1930s (viewed, 10 June 2016):

<http://www.search.windowsonwarwickshire.org.uk/Details.aspx?&ResourceID=4650&PageIndex=1&KeyWord=shop%20window&SortOrder=2>.

<sup>80</sup> See, for example, Lancaster, *Department Store*, 183; Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 356.

<sup>81</sup> *Picture Sheffield*: Window Display – fabrics, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, 1929 (viewed, 10 June 2016),

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<sup>82</sup> Whitaker, *Department Store*, frontispiece, 8, 52. She makes no comment on this seeming paradox.

<sup>83</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 33, 96-9; Corina, *Fine Silks*, 118

<sup>84</sup> WDTJ 15 April 1872: quoted in Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 36-7.

<sup>85</sup> *Bainbridge Calendar*, 1910: quoted in Lancaster, *Department Store*, 54.

<sup>86</sup> Lancaster, *Department Store*, 98.

<sup>87</sup> *Draper's Record*, 30 June 1888.

<sup>88</sup> Quoted in Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 153.

<sup>89</sup> *Kelly's Directory*, 1914.

<sup>90</sup> Pound, *The Fenwick Story* (1972), 56

<sup>91</sup> Mass Observation, *Brown's of Chester*, 212, 216.

<sup>92</sup> Mass Observation, *Browns of Chester*, p.216.

<sup>93</sup> Mass Observation, *Browns of Chester*, 216-7.

<sup>94</sup> See Scott and Walker, 'The British "failure"'; Mitchell, 'Provincial department stores'.