

Cathedrals of Consumption? Provincial Department Stores in England, c.1880–1930

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The department store is often seen as a revolutionary force: transforming retail practices, shopping experiences, and the high street. It is variously lauded for its role in the democratization of luxury, the introduction of price ticketing and unfettered browsing, and the creation of a fantasy world of goods. As is so often the case, reality is more complex than the image, especially when we move away from the bright lights of the metropolis and start exploring the high streets of provincial towns. Based on a thorough trawl of trade directories, I explore the regional distribution of stores in their 1930s heyday and examine how this distribution developed over time, pushing the discussion back to consider the varied origins of provincial department stores. I then turn to the spatial organization, selling practices, and shopping experience of small samples of stores, questioning the extent to which they formed a monolithic retail type.

Contexts and Departures: Global and Local

From their first appearance in mid-nineteenth century Paris and New York—the precise point of origin is disputed between the Le Bon Marché 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 main street or high street, helping to define the modern city and modern urban life. Both the

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stores and their owners were regarded as giants of retailing, financially and physically dominating the smaller shops around them.¹ These leviathans fed off the burgeoning and increasingly wealthy populations of the great cities, especially the metropolises in the Northern Hemisphere.² In retailing terms, they are seen as having been instrumental in the introduction and spread of fixed and ticketed prices; the open display and advertising of goods; the reorganization of business along modern, rational lines; rising levels of productivity; and a massively increased scale of spatial and financial organization.³ The sheer bulk and monumental architecture of these stores transformed the appearance of the high street because they remolded 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, in New York City, and in the monumental scale of American and Parisian stores that embodied the “myth of a new order of commerce.”⁴ 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 on 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.”⁵

This is the received wisdom about department stores. They were undoubtedly a phenomenon—perhaps *the* phenomenon of nineteenth century and early twentieth-century retailing—and thus merit much deeper and wider scrutiny than they have received. This means going beyond stores that are internationally famous to include the variety of formats, practices, and experiences that characterized provincial stores and, as Jeane Lawrence has urged, challenging the image of

1. See, for example, the discussion of Whitley’s in Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*.

2. Pasdermajian, *Department Store*, esp. 3–7; Whitaker, *Department Store*.

3. Pasdermajian, *Department Store*; Jefferys, *Retail Trading in Britain*; Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain”; Lancaster, *Department Store*; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*; Kathryn Morrison, *English Shops*; Scott and Walker, “Large-Scale Interwar Retailing.”

4. Proctor, “Constructing the Retail Monument,” 393. See also Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities*, 16–26.

5. Quoted in Miller, *Bon Marché*, 177. See also Williams, *Dream Worlds*; Bowlby, *Just Looking*; Nava, “Modernity’s Disavowal”; Crossick and Jaumain, “World of the Department Store”; Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*.

the department store as a dreamworld.⁶ Indeed, we should be wary of collapsing all department stores into a single model, influence, or experience, which continues to be all too common in the literature.⁷ Overseas visitors to London were very much aware of the 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 Helle Bertramsen observes, “in contrast to what many recent historians and sociologists have argued, there was nothing monolithic about the stores,” a sentiment that echoes Lawrence’s arguments about intraurban and interurban differences in the United States.⁸ 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 that suggest that many of the revolutionary features of department stores had been tried and tested in earlier times and more established retail formats.⁹

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.¹⁰ Another is the fundamental issue of definition. The universal providers in London and the *grand magasins* (large stores) 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 problematic is the position of the more modest premises that characterized 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 that were not department stores? There is little agreement on how these questions might be answered. James Jefferys rested his definition on size and the range of goods 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

6. Lawrence, “Geographical Space.”

7. See, for example, Chaney, “Department Store as a Cultural Form”; Nava, “Modernity’s Disavowal.” For a counter argument, see Mitchell, “Victorian Provincial Department Store.”

8. Bertramsen, “Defining Victorian Commercial Space,” 11; Lawrence, “Geographical Space.” See also Bertramsen, “Remoulding Commercial Space”; Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain.”

9. See, for example, Walsh, “Newness of the Department Store”; Mitchell, “Victorian Provincial Department Store.”

10. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 140. For examples of store histories, see Asa Briggs, *Friends of the People*; Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters*; Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*.

wear”—the lines that were often most important in generating turnover, accounting for about 40 percent of sales in British department stores in the 1938.¹¹ Nikolaus Pevsner and Gareth Shaw qualified this definition by emphasizing, respectively, the importance of scale and variety and the organization of activity—specifically, the presence of central operating functions such as an accounts department.¹² In essence, such definitions follow contemporary ideas that 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.”¹³ However, there is 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.¹⁴ Moreover, Thomas Markus moves beyond definitions based on size and variety to those focused on the spatial layout of the store, emphasizing 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 experiences of the customer, especially the freedom to browse open displays.¹⁵

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.¹⁶ Nevertheless, a more thorough understanding of the emergence and spread of department stores across the country are central to a proper assessment of their role in any retail revolution. This article unfolds in two halves.

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 standardized 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.¹⁷ That said, *Kelly's* is not without

11. Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 326; Scott and Walker, “Large-Scale Interwar Retailing,” 284.

12. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 140; Pevsner, *History of Building Types*, 267.

13. Wells, *History of Mr. Polly*, 9.

14. Scott and Walker, “Large-Scale Interwar Retailing,” 296.

15. Markus, *Buildings and Power*, especially 308; Whitaker, *Department Store*.

16. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 140. For a similar study of German department stores, see Coles, “Department Stores.”

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

its problems, as Shaw and others have noted.¹⁸ The directories' coverage is far from complete, although it was the smaller back-street shops that tended to be omitted rather than the substantial businesses with which this article is concerned. More problematic is the fact that 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 Blckett'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' 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 three or more adjacent plot frontages) and the range of goods listed as being sold (at least four). This excluded multiple retailers 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 online. 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, Patrick's Ltd. in 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' notion of a "part department store" (i.e., a shop with more than one department but not a full department store¹⁹), but also include many shops operating at 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 that 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 I trace back a sample of these to establish earlier distributions and numbers, assessing the factors that shaped this changing geography.

18. Shaw, "Content and Reliability."

19. Jeffreys, *Retail Trading*, 325–326.

In the second part of the paper, I turn to more qualitative sources to examine some of the retail and shopping practices that characterized department stores beyond the bright lights of metropolitan centers. Rather than business practices, this involves exploring the organization 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. More than 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 to 525 stores in 1938,²⁰ yet this not only excludes Lancashire but also a similar number of "possible" department stores. Even if a small proportion of these stores were to be added, along with perhaps 50 stores in Lancashire, the overall number 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 northeast, and the southeast. 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 that 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 northeast is dissipated.

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

20. *Ibid.*, 59.

Table 1 Distribution of provincial department stores in England, c.1932, by county*

	Department stores	Population (1931)	Department stores per 100,000
Cornwall	5	173,242	2.9
Devon	15	732,968	2.0
Somerset	12	475,142	2.5
Dorset	7	239,352	2.9
Wiltshire	5	303,373	1.6
Gloucestershire	12	786,000	1.5
Southwest (Total)	56	2,710,077	2.1
Norfolk	18	504,846	3.6
Suffolk	8	401,114	2.0
Cambridgeshire	3	217,709	1.4
Huntingdonshire	1	56,206	1.8
Bedfordshire	4	220,525	1.8
Buckinghamshire	2	271,423	0.7
Oxfordshire	7	209,621	3.3
Hertfordshire	12	401,206	3.0
Berkshire	10	311,453	3.2
Essex	8	1,755,459	0.5
Kent	28	1,219,273	2.3
Sussex	16	769,859	2.1
Surrey	14	1,180,878	1.2
Hampshire	23	1,102,770	2.1
Southeast (Total)	155	8,622,342	1.8
Northumberland	15	756,782	2.0
Durham	24	1,436,175	1.7
Yorkshire (North & East)	22	1,034,515	2.1
Yorkshire (West)	36	3,352,555	1.1
Westmorland	1	65,408	1.5
Cumberland	5	263,151	1.9
Cheshire	6	1,087,655	0.6
North (Total)	110	7,996,241	1.4
Hereford	2	111,767	1.8
Worcestershire	8	420,156	1.9
Shropshire	2	244,156	0.8
Staffordshire	7	1,431,175	0.5
Warwickshire	13	1,534,782	0.8
Derbyshire	3	757,332	0.4
Leicester (& Rutland)	5	559,191	0.9
Nottinghamshire	7	712,681	1.0
Northamptonshire	4	361,313	1.1
Lincolnshire	10	624,553	1.6
Midlands (Total)	61	6,757,106	0.9
Total	377	26,085,766	1.4

Sources: *Kelly's Directory*, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1936; 1931 census.

* Excludes Lancashire and London.

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 emphasized by Scott and Walker.²¹ Those counties with above-average unemployment in the 1920s and 1930s were in the north and west of the country, while those with the lowest rates were in the Midlands and especially in 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.²²

Demand, in terms of the spending power of the local population, therefore, appears 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, which 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 percent of the workforce in Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, and Hull, but just 2 percent to 3 percent in Wiltshire, Lincolnshire, and Buckinghamshire.²³ 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 one hundred thousand inhabitants (see Table 1). This paucity is at odds with the region's relative economic buoyancy in the interwar period: unemployment rates were low and a number of local industries were developing rapidly, nurturing both a skilled manual workforce and a growing white-collar sector. Conditions would thus appear to have favored 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 that he puts down to the "small business culture of Birmingham."²⁴ Such arguments are both reductionist and misleading. On the one hand, Birmingham itself was quite well served, with at least seven department

21. Scott and Walker, "Large-Scale Interwar Retailing," 296.

22. See Robson, "The Years Between."

23. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 11. See also Crossick, "Emergence of the Lower Middle Class in Britain," 19–20.

24. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 38.

stores by 1930;²⁵ on the other hand, 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 neighboring counties, while North Riding and Worcestershire were comparatively well supplied, as compared with their neighbors (see Table 1).

Regional distributions were strongly influenced by the presence of large towns. Places such as 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 center of fashionable design in a store constructed along Parisian lines, while Manchester's Kendal, Milne and Co. laid claim to being the largest department store outside of London.²⁶ An important factor here was transport, which Pasdermadjian sees as fundamental to the emergence and spread of department stores.²⁷ Crucial in the early twentieth century was the electric tram, which linked growing suburbs to city centers. In other work, I have demonstrated their importance in shaping the retail geography of Stoke-on-Trent; more specifically, Bainbridge's in Newcastle boasted in 1912 that 2,500 trams passed its door each day.²⁸

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 among the top twenty-five 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 centers of department store retailing.

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 among the resorts as being particularly well served; it had seven shops that might be recognized 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

25. Shaw, "Large-Scale Retailing in Britain," 143, suggests that there were eight "full" department stores in Birmingham in 1910.

26. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 25–31.

27. Pasdermadjian, *Department Store*, 24–25, 43–44.

28. Stobart, "City Centre Retailing"; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 13.

Table 2 Town size and distribution of department stores in provincial England, c.1932: Top 25 towns*

By number of definite department stores (definite + possible)		By population (1931) [†]	
Newcastle	10+6 (16)	<i>Birmingham</i>	1,002,603
Sheffield	10+4 (14)	<i>Sheffield</i>	511,757
Brighton & Hove	8+1 (9)	<i>Leeds</i>	482,809
Birmingham	7+9 (16)	<i>Bristol</i>	397,012
Bournemouth	7+3 (10)	<i>Hull</i>	313,649
Leeds	7+3 (10)	<i>Bradford</i>	298,041
Norwich	7+2 (9)	<i>Newcastle</i>	286,255
Sunderland	7+1 (8)	<i>Nottingham</i>	268,801
Bristol	6+5 (11)	<i>Portsmouth</i>	252,421
Plymouth	6+2 (8)	<i>Leicester</i>	239,111
Middlesbrough	6+1 (7)	<i>Croydon</i>	233,032
Hull	5+5 (10)	<i>Plymouth</i>	208,182
Soton	5+5 (10)	<i>Brighton & Hove</i>	202,420
Portsmouth	5+3 (8)	<i>Sunderland</i>	185,903
Bradford	5+2 (7)	<i>Southampton</i>	176,007
Leicester	5+2 (7)	<i>Coventry</i>	167,046
Nottingham	5+1 (6)	<i>Birkenhead</i>	151,513
Reading	5+0 (5)	<i>Derby</i>	142,406
Stockton on Tees	4+3 (7)	<i>Middlesbrough</i>	138,960
Croydon	4+2 (6)	<i>Wolverhampton</i>	133,190
Gloucester	4+2 (6)	<i>Great Ilford</i>	131,061
Carlisle	4+1 (5)	<i>Southend-on-Sea</i>	129,783
Great Yarmouth	4+1 (5)	<i>Norwich</i>	126,207
West Hartlepool	4+1 (5)	<i>Stockport</i>	125,490
York	4+1 (5)	<i>Gateshead</i>	124,545

Sources: See Table 1.

* Excludes Lancashire and London.

[†] Italics = top 25 by provision.

Weymouth, to Spooner's in Plymouth, drawing on a clientele of well-to-do holidaymakers.²⁹ 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), seaside towns, from Skegness, to Cromer, and 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 was considered to be the largest department store in the south, outside of London.³⁰ With county towns, however, the divide was not clearly

29. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 36. Broadbent's in Southport prospered serving a similar clientele. See Porter, "Provincial Department Store."

30. Morrison, *English Shops*, 171.

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 that was, unusually, described in the 1934 directory as a “modern department store.”³¹ Moreover, some department stores in smaller centers attracted customers from a wide geographical area. Brown’s of Chester, for example, drew not only wealthy clientele from among the gentry and middle classes of rural Cheshire but also from the prosperous suburbs of the Wirral, which was well within the apparent hinterland of Liverpool stores. The attraction was partly Brown’s upscale 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.”³² This again highlights the importance of transport to the development of the department store. Moreover, it challenges Pasdermadjian’s assertion that stores in smaller towns 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 I 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 patronize 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 that usually shopped in multiples, independent stores, and perhaps even at the market.³³ 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 behavior. On a broader scale, there is

31. *Kelly’s Directory*, 1934.

32. Mass Observation and Whitlock, *Brown’s of Chester*, 181. See also Lancaster, *Department Store*, 32–34.

33. Mass Observation and Whitlock, *Brown’s of Chester*, 212–217.

little evidence of a shadow around larger cities, even London; if anything, there appears to have been a positive influence, both in suburbs such as Kingston and Croydon and further afield such as in Hertfordshire and Berkshire, with their high department-store-to-population ratio.

In contrast to the importance of relatively small towns like Chester, some large centers 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 fifty thousand or more, yet in none can a department store be positively identified (although all contain “possible” stores). Such “underserved” 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, with well over one-third of towns in the Midlands and north falling into the lowest quintile of provision per capita, while only one-tenth were in the highest quintile. In contrast, the figures for southern towns were one-tenth 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, one 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 Leeds, Bradford, Hull, and Sheffield, each of which had at least five department stores but ratios of less

Table 3 Per capita distribution of department stores by town, c.1932 (in percentages)*

Region	1st quintile	2nd quintile	3rd quintile	4th quintile	5th quintile
Midlands (<i>n</i> = 30)	43	13	17	20	7
North (<i>n</i> = 28)	29	29	24	8	11
Southeast (<i>n</i> = 79)	13	18	22	23	25
Southwest (<i>n</i> = 27)	4	22	15	26	33

Sources: See Table 1.

* Excludes Lancashire and London.

For allocation of counties to regions, see Table 1.

than one store per fifty thousand inhabitants. There is a stark contrast between these and the small market towns in the south: a single department store in Harpenden (Anscombe & Sons Ltd.), Minehead (Floyd & Sons), and Devizes (Charles Sloper & Sons) could mean ratios as low as one store per three thousand residents. Of course, these were very different shops from the likes of Schofield's in Leeds, Brown Muff & Co. 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.³⁴ They were, nonetheless, department stores of a kind, a point that underlines Bertramsen's warning that a department store should not be viewed as a monolithic type.³⁵ However, 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.³⁶ Indeed, it is notable that industrial towns in the north-east appear to have had a greater tradition of department stores than those in Yorkshire. Certainly, their ratio of customers-to-store was two or three times lower. Such differences require us to look deeper 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 13 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. in Reading was described as a "drapers, outfitters, complete house furnishers, house agents & auctioneers," both in the 1915 and 1931 *Kelly's Directory*, and it occupied the same plot on Broad Street. Similarly, Binns in Sunderland was already in possession of its Fawcett Street premises in 1914, although it was listed simply as "drapers" rather than the more expansive "H. Binns, Son & Co. Ltd. for everything; funerals furnished, night service; motor

34. Scott and Walker, "Large-Scale Interwar Retailing," 301–302.

35. Bertramsen, "Defining Victorian Commercial Space," 11.

36. Morrison, *English Shops*, 142; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 38–39. See also MacKeith, *Shopping Arcades*, 12–16, 70–75.

showrooms; drapers,” which appeared in the 1934 directory.³⁷ 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 organization, and scale of operation to cross the threshold? Some, like Evans & Owen in Bath, Brown Muff & Co. in Bradford, and Lilley’s in Cambridge had clearly been operating as department stores for many decades. Others were established *ab initio* as department stores in the early twentieth century, a process that 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.³⁸ 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 percent of the sample shops were operating as department stores by this date.³⁹ 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 to 225.⁴⁰ If correct, this places greater emphasis on the late nineteenth century rather than the early twentieth century 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 1914.⁴¹

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 had already been trading as such by about 1912. In contrast, well over half of those in Berkshire,

37. *Kelly’s Directory*, 1934.

38. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 140; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 89–93.

39. This figure includes several stores, such as Keddies (in Southend) and Stones (in Romford), which Lancaster suggests passed this threshold only in the 1920s. See Lancaster, *Department Store*, 103.

40. Jefferys, *Retail Trading*, 59.

41. See Lancaster, *Department Store*, 85–93, 103; Pasdermajian, *Department Store*, 46–49.

Table 4 Proportion of stores from c.1932 already trading as department stores in c.1912 (selected counties)*

	Number of department stores		1912 as % of 1932
	1932	1912	
Derbyshire	3	2	66.6
Leicester (& Rutland)	5	5	100.0
Lincolnshire	10	4	40.0
Northamptonshire	4	3	75.0
Nottinghamshire	7	5	71.4
Staffordshire	7	5	71.4
Midlands (Total)	36	24	66.6
Cheshire	7	4	57.1
Cumberland	5	2	40.0
Durham	24	16	66.7
Northumberland	15	9	60.0
North (Total)	51	31	60.8
Bedfordshire	4	2	50.0
Berkshire	10	4	40.0
Cambridgeshire	3	3	100.0
Essex	8	6	75.0
Hampshire (inc Isle of Wight)	23	18	78.3
Hertfordshire	12	7	58.3
Norfolk	18	11	61.1
Suffolk	8	4	50.0
Sussex	16	12	75.0
Southeast (Total)	102	67	65.7
Cornwall	5	1	20.0
Devon	15	10	66.7
Gloucestershire	12	10	83.3
Somerset	12	7	58.3
Southwest (Total)	44	28	63.6

Source: *Kelly's Directory*, 1911, 1912, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1936.

* Excludes Lancashire and London.

Cumberland, and Lincolnshire only made the jump to department store trading after 1912. 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 of Chester, catered to the bourgeois taste of the county and industrial elite; Beales in Bournemouth attracted well-to-do holiday-makers; 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 neighborhood agents.⁴² 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.

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 center co-operatives retained a system of separate units. Sometimes, as in Leicester, it was behind a single façade, reflecting, in part, a mistrust of the frivolous and wasteful consumption seen as characterizing department stores. However, the early twentieth century saw two important developments that 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 (1925–1926) had echoes of Selfridges' Oxford Street store, while the central store of the Newcastle Co-operative Society Limited (built in 1929) was a fine example of art deco design.⁴³ 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."⁴⁴ 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

42. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 99, 119–120.

43. *Ibid.*, 88–89; Morrison, *English Shops*, 146–155.

44. Souvenir Calendar, Ashton Co-operative Society, 1928, quoted in Morrison, *English Shops*, 153.

west Midland towns reveals just five department stores and eleven “part department stores” in 1870, rising to twenty-five and thirty-seven, respectively, by 1910.⁴⁵ 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 for an extrapolation of Shaw’s findings spatially (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 overestimate, it appears that the period 1870 to 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, among many others, all trace their origins as department stores to the 1870s and 1880s, the revolutionary phase of Shaw’s two-stage model.⁴⁶ 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, as the data presented in Table 5

Table 5 The number of department stores in selected towns, c.1892–1932

	c.1892		c.1912		c.1932	
	No. of stores	Mean frontage	No. of stores	Mean frontage	No. of stores	Mean frontage
Brighton	3 or 4	4.3	5	6.1	7	8.8
Carlisle	1 or 2	3.0	3	7.0	4	14.0
Chester	2	2.5	3	3.3	3	5.0
Devizes	0		1	4.0	1	4.0
Hanley	2	3.5	2 or 3	6.3	4	6.3
Leamington Spa	1	3.0	3	3.7	3	6.0
Newark	0		1	4.0	1	4.0
Northwich	0		0 or 1	n/a	1	n/a
Sunderland	4	4.3	6	5.8	7	7.0
Total	13-15	3.4	24-26	5.1	31	6.9

Source: *Kelly's Directory*, 1892, 1911, 1912, 1931, 1932, 1934.

The street numbers for Bratt & Evans in Northwich were not given in the trade directories. The range of stores for Brighton and Carlisle in 1892 and Hanley and Northwich in 1912 reflects uncertainty over the status of particular shops as department stores at these dates.

45. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 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*, 325–326.

46. Shaw, “Large-Scale Retailing in Britain,” 140.

indicate, 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, while 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—such as 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 (in Carlisle, for example, the narrow plots tended 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 (see Table 5). That said, stores were noticeably bigger in larger centers, particularly by the early twentieth century. By the 1930s, William Hill in Hove had premises stretching from 48-61 Western Road, while Blackett & Sons in Sunderland 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 Brown's of Chester were smaller still, despite the prestigious nature of the store, although it did trade over three floors.

All this suggests that department stores came earlier and were generally larger in the bigger towns, as might be expected. 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 preexisting 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 the 1880s in Manchester, Birmingham, and, less successfully, Sheffield to cater to the growing demand from an increasingly well-paid urban workforce.⁴⁷ A decade later, Bobby's was spreading along the south coast, taking advantage of

47. Briggs, *Friends of the People*, chapters 3 and 4.

the market provided by holidaymakers 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 programs of acquisition undertaken by Selfridges, the Drapery, General Investment Trust, and, later, Debenhams, John Lewis, and United Drapery Stores.⁴⁸ 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;⁴⁹ 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."⁵⁰

Table 6 Department stores chains, c.1932

Company	Original store / headquarters	Location of branches
H. Binns, Son & Co.	Sunderland	Carlisle, Darlington, Middlesbrough, Newcastle, South Shields, West Hartlepool
Bobby & Co. Ltd.	London	Bournemouth, Eastbourne, Exeter, Folkestone, Leamington Spa, Margate, Torquay
Featherstone's Ltd.		Canterbury, Gravesend, Maidstone, Rochester, Sheerness, Sittingbourne
William McIlroy Ltd.		Aylesbury, Bath, High Wycombe, Newbury, Portsmouth, Southampton, Swindon
Lewis's Plummer Roddis Ltd.	Liverpool	Birmingham, Leeds, Manchester, Sheffield Boscombe, Bournemouth, Brighton, Eastbourne, Folkestone, Hastings, Southampton, Weymouth
M. Robinson & Sons Ltd.	Darlington	Stockton-on-Tees, West Hartlepool

Source: *Kelly's Directory*, 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934, 1936.

48. See Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 326–329; Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters*, 92–114; Honeycombe, *Selfridges*, 59–60; Lancaster, *Department Store*, 85–93; Shaw, "Large-Scale Retailing in Britain," 283.

49. In an echo of Beale's transformation in Bournemouth, Green & Son was listed in the 1914 *Kelly's Directory* as "newspaper office, confectioner and stationer."

50. *Kelly's Directory*, 1914.

Plots, Premises, and Fittings

These takeovers 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 neighboring 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 article, but it is striking that more than 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 at 49-51 Stafford Street in 1892 to a substantial corner plot occupying 53-55 Stafford Street and 1-17 Trinity Street by 1912.⁵¹ 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 organize these into separate departments, a structure that was emphasized 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, interlinked 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.⁵²

Assembling a consolidated block of buildings also allowed comprehensive redevelopment to take place. Shaw carefully traced this process for Beattie's in 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, as was the case for Kendal Milne in Manchester and Brown Muff & Co. in Bradford.⁵³ The result was the construction of some impressive buildings, often the largest and most striking in the city center. These range from the seven-story, seventeen-bay neo-baroque pile built for John Walsh's in Sheffield; to the so-called crystal palace of McIlroy's

51. *Kelly's Directory*, 1914, 1932.

52. Morriss and Hoverd, *Buildings of Chester*, 28.

53. Shaw, "Large-Scale Retailing in Britain," 143-145; Morrison, *English Shops*, 147-148, 171-172; Mitchell, "Victorian Provincial Department Stores." See also Porter, "Provincial Department Store"; Bertramsen, "Remoulding Commercial Space."

in Reading, with its continuous glass wall on the lower two floors; and to the art deco splendor of Roddis House in Bournemouth.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, looking across the full set of provincial department stores, it is clear that such monumental building programs were exceptional; most provincial department stores had solid premises on quite modest sites, which was 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.⁵⁵ Even where rebuilding did occur, it was usually quite restrained. Brookfield's in Stafford redeveloped its corner plot around 1890, and remodeled the exterior with a unifying façade built onto both Greengate Street and St. Mary's Gate, but its scale and design ensured a balanced streetscape rather than overshadowing its neighbors. Much the same was true of Bratt & Dyke's new corner building in Hanley, opened in 1897, and known as "The Central." It was impressive but not overbearing and included three prominent gables carrying the building's name, its date of construction, and heraldic imagery.⁵⁶

The buildings and internal arrangement of department stores reflected their scale of operation and functional organization; that is, large-scale businesses subdivided 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, if any, could match the drama of the domed atria and luxurious use of materials and decorative detail seen in metropolitan stores.⁵⁷ Provincial stores, however, still deployed many of the same features: Wylie and Lohead 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; while a little later many purpose-built co-operative society central stores, including those in Newcastle and Sheffield, had impressive art deco interiors.⁵⁸ 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's

54. Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 287–365; Morrison, *English Shops*, 147.

55. Morriss and Hoverd, *Buildings of Chester*, 105–106.

56. See Staffordshire Past Track website for photos, "Bratt & Dyke Department Store, Hanley, 1897"; the building was remodeled in 1937 to include a third story of showrooms.

57. See Whitaker, *Department Store*.

58. Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*; Morrison, *English Shops*, 153–155. For French comparisons, see Coley, "Les Magasins Reunis."

Co-operative Society's City Store in Sheffield were made of walnut and boxwood, and the stairs were of marble terrazzo.⁵⁹

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 included various showrooms; by the second quarter of the nineteenth century, most provincial towns had a number of substantial emporia selling drapery, china, glassware, or furniture from elegant showrooms.⁶⁰ 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, while the Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd. in Sheffield comprised a series of incredibly cramped rooms at 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.⁶¹

What characterized all these stores, large and 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 storeowners to track the relative turnover of different lines and departments. For example, Broadbent's in Southport grew its business from £18,218 in 1892–1893 to £27,570 in 1900–1901, with perfumes and patent medicines accounting for around £2,900 of this turnover.⁶² The accounts of Cockayne's in Sheffield, meanwhile, showed gross profits

59. See Picture Sheffield website for photos, "Millinery Displays, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, Exchange Street, 1929," and "Stairs Up to Restaurants and Offices, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, Exchange Street, 1929."

60. Walsh, "Newness of the Department Store"; Morrison, *English Shops*, 125–132; West, *History, Topography and Directory of Warwickshire*.

61. For example, see Staffordshire Past Track website for photo, "Brookfield's Department Store Interior, Stafford, c.1900–1910." See Windows on Warwickshire website for photo, "Leamington Spa, Woodwards Furniture Department store, 1958." See Picture Sheffield's website for photo, "Gentlemen's Department, Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd., 19-23 Howard Street, 1936. Morrison, *English Shops*, 153.

62. Porter, "Provincial Department Store," 282. Concession shops within larger stores were introduced slowly in the United States in the 1930s. Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 149–151.

from a total of twenty-eight departments by 1914.⁶³ From the customers' perspective, these departments were generally encountered as a series of spatially distinct units assembled under one roof. In each unit, 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.⁶⁴ 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.⁶⁵ Glass display cabinets were featured in numerous eighteenth-century trade cards and inventories, and 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 and yet still tantalizingly out of reach.⁶⁶ Typically, glass counters were filled with smallwares, gloves, perfumes, jewelry, and the like, all neatly arranged in piles and rows to create striking yet orderly displays; 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).⁶⁷

Rather slower to spread to smaller stores was a genuinely new display technique: the use of mannequins. In their original headless form, these were used in the 1890s by Jolly & Son Ltd. in Bath to display bridal gowns, and were used a little later in the ladies' costume department in Brown Muff & Co. in Bradford and in Mason & Sons Ltd. in Ipswich, at least when setting out clothes for the camera.⁶⁸ They were found in smaller stores, such as E. Francis & Sons in Leamington Spa, by the early twentieth century, but again most often

63. Shaw, "Large-Scale Retailing in Britain," 152.

64. Whitaker, *Department Store*, 202.

65. See, for example, Walsh, "Shop Design"; Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 76–115; Stobart, Hann, and Morgan, *Spaces of Consumption*, 123–132; Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 219–252.

66. Whitaker, *Department Store*, 210.

67. See Staffordshire Past Tracks website for photo, "Brookfield's Shop Interior." See Picture Sheffield website for photo "Gents Outfitting, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, 1929."

68. Kindred, *Ipswich*, 33.

as headless figures—more like a tailor’s dummy.⁶⁹ More lifelike mannequins, of the kind 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, mannequins had penetrated even the somewhat more plebian stores, such as the Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd., while upper-class stores were building special mannequin display stands to create tableaux.⁷⁰

Much more common in smaller stores was the flipside of these elegant displays: a piling of goods on every available surface to create an image that Whitaker calls “orderly profusion.”⁷¹ 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.”⁷² However, such profusion characterized the 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 maximize sales from every square foot of floor space and partly from a desire to create a visually striking display of goods that emphasized choice; but it also linked to the crowded space of the Victorian and Edwardian parlor: the cornucopia of the shop echoing that of the home.⁷³

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. While 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-aggrandizing 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 meant the removal of counters. Indeed, when the counters were ripped out of Whiteley’s in the 1950s, there was such a protest from customers that the store

69. Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 295, 340.

70. See Picture Sheffield website for photos “Gentlemen’s Department” and “Ladies’ Wear Display, Mannequin Stand, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, 1929.”

71. Whitaker, *Department Store*, 207.

72. Waxmann, *Shopping Guide to Paris and London*, 3.

73. Cohen, *Household Gods*, esp. 122–144.

was forced to abandon the plan.⁷⁴ 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.⁷⁵ 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 while being served; they were surrounded by goods piled on shelves, and on the floor, and even hung from the ceiling, yet their focus was 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 goods at least in part through catalogues. Its cramped spaces strongly challenge our image of department stores; they were 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. While 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 City Stores in Sheffield into the 1930s, as they were at Kendal Milne, 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.⁷⁶

There was a similar tension between traditional and innovative approaches in the use of window displays and street frontages. Again, it is important to be wary of the hyperbole surrounding the dramatic changes wrought by department stores, especially those away from metropolitan centers, because shopkeepers had displayed 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 passers-by to look at shop windows, placed greater emphasis on the window as a key way of attracting people

74. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 196.

75. Briggs, *Friends of the People*, 66.

76. See, for example, Picture Sheffield website for photos "China Department, Empire Trading Stamp Co. Ltd, General Dealers, 19-23 Howard Street, 1936"; and Staffordshire Past Tracks website for photo "Fashion Accessories Department, Bratt and Dyke, Hanley, c.1950–1953."

into the shop.⁷⁷ Even away from the bright lights of London, these encouraged the remodeling of shop fronts to maximize display space and draw the gaze of the passerby. The modest double frontage of Charles Sloper's in Devizes, Wiltshire, was modernized in 1929 to incorporate a recessed area on the ground floor, which allowed window-shoppers to browse under cover; a glazed display cabinet protruding onto the pavement; and a solid wall of windows on the first floor designed not only to illuminate the showrooms behind them but also display wares to those passing in omnibuses.⁷⁸ In Middlesbrough, Dickson & Benson took this further with what it advertised as "the Arcade Store": a series of recessed fronts that ran the entire 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 in Leamington Spa dedicated a window to Jaeger wear, filling the space with corsets, petticoats, vests, dressing gowns, and such; 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, hats were hung from the ceiling and lacework, feather boas, and hosiery were draped over poles; price tickets were attached to most of these goods. A decade later, Woodward's, a neighboring store, was still happy to cram its double-window on the Parade with a display of Wolsey underwear, mixing images of Cardinal Wolsey with piles of socks, draped vests, and long johns, with price tickets.⁷⁹ Again, these seem to occupy a separate world from the highly stylized and professionally dressed windows of Selfridges or Harrods, but they appear to have typified provincial window displays until the postwar period. Only rarely was a more restrained or stylized approach adopted, as at Heelas in Reading, where a 1934 window display contained just eight full or half mannequins dressed in the latest fashions.⁸⁰ Significantly, co-operative societies were among the more imaginative when it came to window

77. Hann and Stobart, "Sites of Consumption"; Morrison, *English Shops*, 41–65; Powers, *Shop Fronts*; Whitaker, *Department Store*, 172–199.

78. Such features were already commonplace in larger stores, such as McLroy's in Reading and John Walsh's in Sheffield.

79. See Windows on Warwickshire website for photos "Leamington Spa, E. Francis & Sons Ltd., c.1920–1929," and "Leamington Spa, Woodward's Drapery Show Window."

80. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 183; Moss and Turton, *Legend in Retailing*, 356.

dressing, with central stores adopting metropolitan approaches. 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.⁸¹

Keeping the Customer Satisfied

It is easy to overemphasize the distinction between the metropolitan and provincial worlds; for all their sophistication, major stores clung to what seems like remarkably old-fashioned forms of selling. In Paris, the elegance and sophistication of the interiors and window displays of Printemps, Le Bon Marché, and Samaritaine were 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.⁸² Conversely, the roof gardens and playgrounds, balloon launches and circus acts, reading rooms and concerts that characterized 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 in Norwich advertised that its "orchestral trio plays daily from 12 to 6 p.m.," while Bobby's in Bournemouth hired music hall acts to appear at coffee mornings and teatime. In common with many stores, local rival Beale's hosted Father Christmas, rather dramatically having him arrive by airplane. In Kingston, Bentall's had a Palm Court Orchestra, regular mannequin parades and bonny baby competitions; each year it displayed the flowers from the Royal Box at Ascot and held a circus for the children at Christmas; it also exhibited Donald Campbell's Bluebird car, and hired a Swedish girl who climbed a ladder to the top of the central well before diving twenty meters into a tank of water.⁸³

More prosaically, but far more important on a day-to-day basis, many provincial stores incorporated restrooms 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

81. See Picture Sheffield website for photos "Window Display—Fabrics, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, Exchange Street, 1929," and "Window Display—Ladies Shoes, Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society Ltd., City Stores, Exchange Street, 1929."

82. Whitaker, *Department Store*, frontispiece, 8, 52. Whitaker makes no comment on this seeming paradox.

83. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 33, 96–99; Corina, *Fine Silks and Oak Counters*, 118.

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."⁸⁴ Tearooms, meanwhile, became a fixture even in smaller stores and co-operative central stores; for example, 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 such as 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 in 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.⁸⁵

This emphasis on 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 competitive 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 tearooms and restrooms 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 of the 1930s.⁸⁶ 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

84. *Warehousemen and Drapers Trade Journal*, April 15, 1872, quoted in Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 36–37.

85. *Bainbridge Calendar* 1910, quoted in Lancaster, *Department Store*, 54.

86. Lancaster, *Department Store*, 98.

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;⁸⁷ however, there was also a growing fascination with American techniques of store organization, which was predicated on the free movement of customers.

A widespread criticism of upscale British stores, especially among visitors from the United States, was the use of floorwalkers. Ideally, these employees would make the middle-class customer feel welcome at the front door and escort them politely among 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.”⁸⁸ It was also inappropriate in those provincial stores in which the core clientele was drawn from the lower-middle and working classes. 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 in Carlisle, for example, declared 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.”⁸⁹ A few years earlier, Fenwick’s in 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.”⁹⁰ This freedom of movement was clearly popular—customer numbers grew from 295 to more than 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 in many other stores, sometimes because of reticence or prejudice among senior staff. The 1940s Mass Observation study of Brown’s of Chester 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 of working-class people to “eat with their knives.” Some customers were also worried about a potential move down-market, one complaining, “Nowadays, you meet the people from the back streets there”; others still saw it as exclusive, maintaining, “I never go to Browns, I leave that to the toffs.”⁹¹

87. *Draper’s Record*, June 30, 1888.

88. Quoted in Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure*, 153.

89. *Kelly’s Directory*, 1914.

90. Pound, *Fenwick Story*, 56.

91. Mass Observation and Whitlock, *Brown’s of Chester*, 212, 216.

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:

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.⁹²

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."⁹³ This does not mean that these customers did all or most of their shopping at Brown's, but it is a reminder that shopping behavior 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 place to buy Christmas presents.

Conclusions

This article has attempted to recover something of the geography, layout, and experiences of ordinary department stores in provincial England in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. That a geographical survey has not previously been attempted can, perhaps, be attributed to problems of definition and evidence. 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, while the conclusions that might be drawn from the data, which are the product of judgments as to what constitutes a department store, must be treated with caution, both the processes and the outcomes

92. *Ibid.*

93. *Ibid.*, 216–217.

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 century 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 the distribution of department stores: the south was better provided per capita than the north and, within this, the northeast, for example, was better provided than was Yorkshire. However, while there is 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 localized. There was growing competition from multiples because even shops like Brown's 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 neighboring towns, as could an individual store, such as Brown's, which enjoyed a good reputation among the geographically mobile.

My second point arises, in part, from this wide distribution across a varied set of towns: that department stores were not a single monolithic type. Obvious contrasts might be drawn between grand metropolitan and more workaday provincial stores in terms of technology, management organization, profitability, and productivity (points emphasized by Scott and Walker), and in the scale of premises, shopping environment, and customer experience. However, 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 of 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 on local circumstances and the historical development of retailing in 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 behavioral codes and had very different social implications.

This links to my 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 stores both in London and in the provinces, and is revealed both through business practices and the changing use of internal space and shop fittings.⁹⁴ These reveal not only 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 among some storeowners and customers, the potential of display and unmediated access to goods was certainly opened up more fully by the practices of provincial stores. 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 onward, even where investment in new technology and management structures was lacking. In order to properly understand the role of provincial department stores, much more work is needed on their retail practices and their business organization, as well as the character of their shop floors and the experiences 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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