The Bookshop, the Draper, the Candlestick Maker

Annie Gray

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A history of the high street

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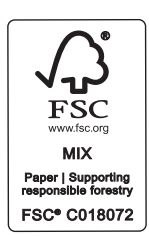

For Matt, finally, one just for you

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Introduction

On average, I walk along my local high street once a week. I live in a city, but a small one. The high street here would struggle to hold a visitor for more than half an hour (unless, like me, you are easily distracted by a good bookshop). I can buy most of what I need on a weekly basis, even without going to the city centre supermarket. We have a couple of packaging-free shops, a scattering of pharmacies, some health shops, a butcher, and various café-bakeries catering for both the flat-white-and-sourdough-croissant brigade and the builders'-tea-and-white-sliced lovers. There's a bike shop which also sells toys, models, fabric and paint; a cookware and obscure cleaning products emporium with a sideline in wallpaper; a gardening/pet shop; and a sports shop which also has uniforms for the local schools. Theres's the usual array of small clothing chains, some pubs and a lot – really, quite a lot – of charity shops.

I'm a regular at only about four of these shops, plus the twice-weekly market. Some I regard with mild horror (shout out to the stinky sandwich shop and the remaindered bookshop which pumps out bubbles and has a window full of plastic tat). In the interests of full disclosure, I admit that I am not a fan of shopping for pleasure, and the idea of a Saturday morning spent in the pursuit of a new outfit makes me want to run and hide.

And yet, I love my high street. I love looking in the window of the shoe shop at high heels I'd never be seen dead in; I always sniff the air as I go past the chocolate shop; and I like making faces back at the kids in the barbers as their parents tell them to sit still while they have their hair cut. In fact, I love all high streets. I find them endlessly fascinating. The need – or some-

times simple desire – to buy something specific might draw me in, but once I'm there the experience goes way beyond mere shopping.

What defines a high street? The *Oxford English Dictionary* calls it simply 'the main shopping street of a town or city', which is short, but to the point. Or how about 'the most important and liveliest shopping and commercial street of a town, or of a city district'? Other definitions add important nuances, mainly around what it is not: the high street is not privately owned (i.e. it is not a shopping mall – though a mall may appear on it); it is not suburban; and, while a lot of villages have a road called high street, it is not rural. High streets implicitly occur only in places of a certain size, though this is rarely defined, and changes depending on the era, as one century's metropolis is another's forgotten backwater.[1]

It's certainly not just about the shopping. Shops are the focus here because they are often what we mean when we talk about the high street, and because they are the key factor when we define it. But while you cannot (perhaps) have a high street without shops, they are also a background for so much more. High streets are the focal point of a town, and by extension, the communities which live in them. They are the location both residents and visitors will head to as a place of first resort, whether they seek things to buy, places to eat and drink, or ways to enjoy themselves. The high street might include services, from banks to insurance brokers, along with street performers, people shouting about politics and religion, parades and charity 'chuggers' or poppy sellers, depending on the time of year.

The high street does not have to involve spending. You might be there to look at the Christmas lights, or to gain inspiration for a new outfit. You might meet friends at a local landmark, feel inclined to put flowers on a memorial, or simply sit for a while reading a book. As well as benches, streetlights, troughs full of flowers (and not infrequently signs asking people not to

nick the fuchsias) and public loos, there's also likely to be a cab rank, post boxes, and a telephone box containing a defibrillator (or unwanted books).

In larger towns, the type I'm talking about in this book, the high street is often more than just one street. The exact area might be ill-defined, encompassing several main streets and the areas between them – and the main locus might move over time.

I'm sure you can think of high streets you love and high streets you're less keen on. The modern-day cry is that the high street is dying, that the commercial and service function of such streets is increasingly gone, driven to the brink by the rise of out-of-town shopping centres, supermarkets, and the internet. In the past couple of decades thousands of independent stores have been lost, and several thousand more chain outlets have disappeared, though some brand names survive in a hollowed-out form online. But 'bricks and mortar' retail isn't alone in amassing bankruptcies or buyouts. Online retailers also go bust, and turnover within the sector is high, no matter how or where products are sold.

We talk of decline, of failure, and of empty shops and desolate shopping streets, and in some towns and high streets there's an undeniable sense of shabbiness. Areas with high levels of deprivation (and low levels of tourism) inevitably have more forlorn high streets – though it's important not to assume they aren't still meeting the needs of the local population just because they don't have anywhere with stripped-back walls and overpriced coffee. Every town is different: every high street is as well. Ninety-eight per cent of the British public say they'd care at least a bit if their local high street disappeared; the fact that we are even asking this question shows how bad the outlook seems to be.[2]

The high street definitely isn't what it used to be. But should we really couch this in terms of failure? Would we not

be better off, perhaps, talking simply of change? Certainly, twenty or thirty years ago high streets were busier, with more desirable shops, and plenty of them. Most of us will have warm fuzzy feelings over particular stores which defined our teenage years, glossing over terrible changing-rooms or the fact that pick 'n' mix wasn't actually that great. We can all see the changes wrought by the last few decades, and we are all aware of the discourse surrounding the modern high street.

There have always been debates, though, and many of them aren't new. Throughout history we've argued over luxury and necessity, over the morality of spending, and over the way in which shopping encourages us all to be rapacious, wasteful and rude – or not. We've struggled to square the enjoyment of personal service with the desire for speed and ease. And we've argued over small shops versus big shops, chains versus independents, and what, exactly, should be the rules governing shopkeepers and shoppers alike.

Meanwhile the role of women has been continually contentious, with shop assistants in the past often assumed to be selling their bodies as well as their wares, and female shoppers portrayed as spendthrift and feckless, especially when they did not – or more usually could not – earn for themselves the money they were so happy to spend.

We haven't resolved any of these questions, though we may have added a few more. Whichever era you fetch up in, you'll find yourself considering capitalism and consumerism, along with the balance of power between producers, consumers and retailers.

This book comes out of my interest in food, specifically the procurement of it. An awful lot of shopping is for food, and historically a significant part of our weekly budget was spent on it – around a third of household income for the majority of people in the late nineteenth century, dropping to around a fifth in the 1950s.[3] Although the earliest shops were as likely to

be jewellers or swordsmiths as bakers or butchers, food was – and is – crucial to the high street, whether in the form of shops, restaurants, pubs or street vendors.

For a long time, writing about the high street centred on the idea of a 'revolution', both in consumerism and retail practice. Questions over when this 'revolution' took place have dominated academic discourse, and have seeped into popular mentality, giving rise to a vague feeling that it all started quite suddenly in the middle of the nineteenth century. But apparent markers of modernity such as fixed shops, the encouragement of browsing, shopping for pleasure and cash sales came in gradually and co-existed with earlier practice for decades, if not centuries. Likewise, it's important not to see the modern high street as some sort of culmination of centuries of forward development. What we have now – like at any other time – is simply an evolutionary point. Older forms of accessing goods – via markets, pedlars, barter with neighbours or friends, or, indeed, by making them ourselves – have not been eclipsed by shops because they are somehow more modern or 'better'. A new way of doing something does not necessarily push out an old one, and the path to where we are today is not a linear one.

I've chosen to concentrate on certain key shops, and specifically the products found in them, which are (mostly) still a part of the high street today. In each main chapter we'll start with a shopping list, and an idea of the shopper behind it. Over the course of the book, we'll visit grocers and bookshops, toyshops and clothing stores, shoe shops and pharmacies, among others. There were many other types of shop, some of which were present for hundreds of years, others of which lasted only a short time, to which I've devoted less space. You'll find only passing mention of tobacconists, saddlers, bookmakers, music dealers and whitesmiths (a type of metal worker), for example. I've also chosen not to cover services, like banks or barbers, and you'll only see the occasional reference to sellers which were

always on the periphery of the high street, such as pawnbrokers and second-hand clothing dealers.

I won't be taking you physically far away from the high street at all, though you will find yourself reading about the market, for its relationship with the high street is long and significant. And, of course, we'll stop to eat. You'll also be invited to walk down some high streets, at various points in time, to see what it all looks like on the ground.

We're going to concentrate on the period between 1650 and 1965. While shopping for pleasure certainly existed prior to then, the mid-seventeenth century is generally acknowledged to be the earliest time we can properly identify a high street in the larger towns and cities of the UK. This is when we see clusters of fixed shops in one location, and a sense that those shops may be pleasurable as well as practical.[4] It's a time of seismic change in Britain, when revolution, civil war and the short-lived English Republic all impacted upon people's beliefs and behaviours. Since nothing exists in a vacuum, and the gradual nature of change is one of the key themes of this book, we'll start by looking at what came before. Likewise, although the main part of the book stops just before most of us can really remember what the high street looked like, all the elements of the modern high street are present by then, so the last chapter really just brings the story up to date.

It's impossible not to view the past through the present and make comparisons. Sometimes it is in the physicality of shopping – exchanges are a bit like malls, and bazaars are a bit like department stores. Sometimes it's in the way in which people talk about the high street: a sense of 'use it or lose it', or debates over ethics or morals which lead some people to get disproportionately angry, whether that's about temperance hotels or vegan cafés. It's not wrong to compare, and to use our own experiences to make sense of the past. But we shouldn't take it too far, and we should remember that within the parameters of

each era the high street always reflected the needs and desires of the people who used it.

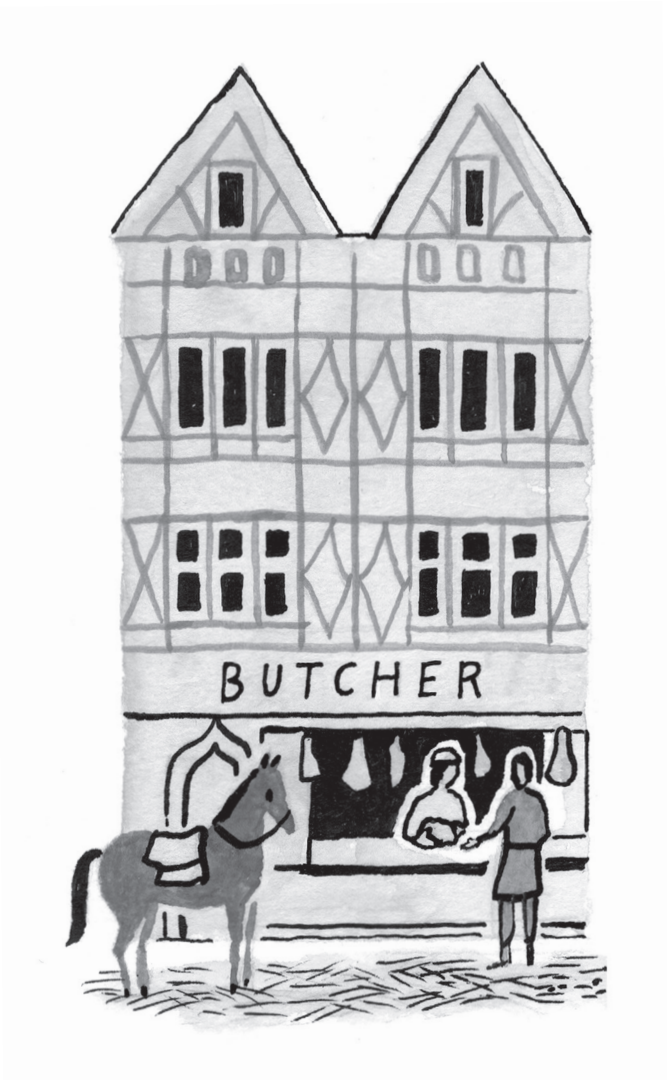
It's time, now, to leave the modern era behind, and to go back to where it all started. Let's head, not exactly to the high street, but to the market, the church, and the centre of a typical British town.

Chapter One

Up to the 1650s

I saw in this crowd as you shall hear later.
Bakers and brewers and butchers a-many,
Woollen-websters and weavers of linen,
Tailors and tinkers, toll-takers in markets,
Masons and miners and men of all crafts.
Of all kinds of labourers there stood forth some;
Ditchers and diggers that do their work ill
And spend all the day singing 'Dieu vous sauve, dame Emme!'
Cooks and their knaves cried 'Pies, hot pies!
Good pork and good goose! Come, dine! Come, dine!'[1]

– William Langland, *Piers Plowman* (1360s–1380s)


BUTCHER

When William Langland wrote his allegorical poem *Piers Plowman* in the late fourteenth century, he included people and crafts his reader would know. Makers and vendors of food, drink and cloth jostled in his dreamscape with the people who would buy their wares. They formed a crowd in the marketplace, surrounded by cookshops and taverns crying for custom. The scene was busy, noisy and full of smells. It was, in short, a pretty typical, albeit fictional, market day in a medieval town.

For most of history, shopping has been focused on the market, and what we'd now call the high street developed around the market area. Until at least the eighteenth century – and in many cases well beyond – acquiring everyday goods meant going to the market. Even the term for buying food and other basic items reflected this: not shopping, but marketing. To get there, you might walk down a Market Street or a Broad Street. But there were also High Streets. The term was in use by Anglo-Saxon times, and simply meant the main road. Sometimes it was literally high, raised above other roads into the town by dint of repeated resurfacing or being shored up against flooding.

God versus goods

Until the thirteenth century, you'd probably have found the market in the churchyard. Religion was an integral part of medieval life, and the central focus of any town was its church, along with civic buildings such as guildhalls (the guild in this case being the town corporation or council, and the term guildhall simply meaning town hall). It made sense to locate

the market at this easily identifiable point. Then came the Black Death pandemic of 1348–52, which caused a population drop of 30–40 per cent. In its wake, more of those left moved into towns. By the end of the century twenty-seven towns had a population of more than 2,500, and town authorities found themselves having to rethink the way urban space was organised to cope with population pressure. Market day could bring hundreds of extra bodies into a town, with all the potential for disruption and annoyance to permanent residents that implied – along, of course, with the opportunity to sell stuff to visitors who were there for that exact purpose.

New, planned marketplaces were the answer. They were regulated by town law, with the town authorities, or sometimes the local aristocrat or other owning body, profiting from rents and other fees, such as fines for breaking the many rules that were imposed, but frequently ignored. The right to hold a market was a coveted one, denoting a change in status as the town was recognised as a local hub by Royal Charter (hence the phrase charter market). Markets quickly became a focal point, not just for retail, but also for food and drink, plus other activities such as public performance, protest and the enacting of punishments. Visiting the marketplace, you might listen to a public proclamation or pause to wonder what the unfortunate person in the stocks had done. Perhaps you'd have your pocket picked while trying to fathom how a conjuror was making a ball jump from one cup to another.

The church was still important though. Many of these medieval marketplaces were sited with the church at one end or very close, retaining the link between feeding body and soul, and reminding you that earthly goods were as nothing compared to what lay beyond. Even when they moved away from the churchyard, they retained the market cross, or one was newly constructed. In Malmesbury, Wiltshire, the market cross was explicitly erected so that 'persons which resort hither in

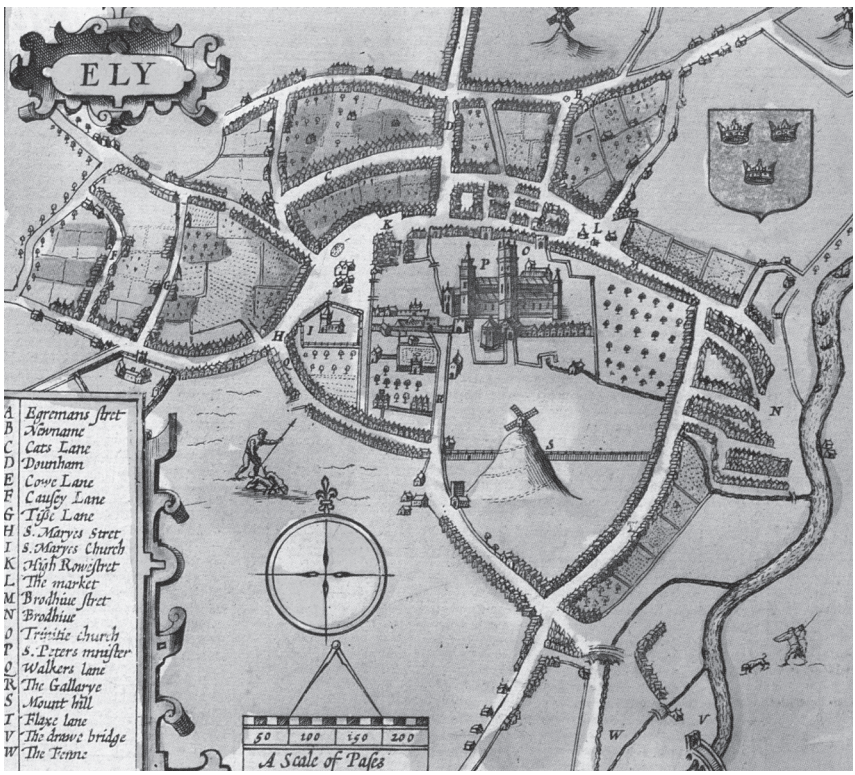


Fig. 1.1. Ely, Cambridgeshire, in 1611. *L* is the market complete with cross and scattered infill buildings, and the street leading from *L* to *K* is the high street.

market ouvert might think upon their dear Saviour which died for them upon the Crosse, of which this fair Market Crosse is a sign and symbol; to the end that rogues and cozeners may look upon it and cease them of their guile'.[2] It was hardly subtle. However, as uplifting as linking Jesus and the renouncing of dodgy dealings sounded in practice, in reality the crosses quickly became a focus for materiality, in the form of mainly female butter sellers who came in from the surrounding farms for the day. The plinths upon which the crosses stood were useful for laying out wares, and they were an obvious focal

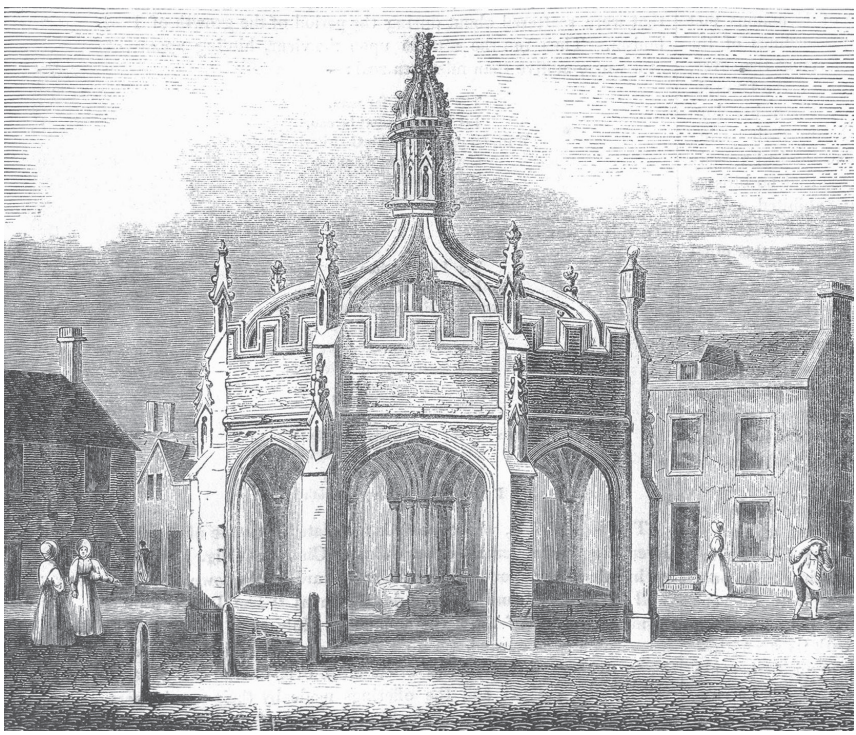


Fig. 1.2. Malmesbury Market Cross in 1845. Erected around 1490, with lavish sculptures of saints and a carving of the crucifixion. This picture was published about fifty years after a significent renovation project. The cross remains in situ.

point for finding a product which benefited from early buying, before the sun got up, the dust rose, and you risked ending up with rancid, gritty butter. Eventually, in some towns, the cross became known as the butter cross, sometimes now with a roof added to provide shelter. Surviving examples include those in Oakham, Canterbury and Barnard Castle.

Retail was surrounded with suspicion. It was very tightly regulated, the three major crimes being engrossing, forestalling and regrating. Engrossing and forestalling referred to the practice of buying goods wholesale, or before they reached the

market, thereby denying the individual consumer the chance to buy them direct from the seller. Regrating was the inevitable result, whereby the offender was found to be selling goods on at a profit. There was a great deal of colourful language aimed in the direction of the evil middlemen, and the dislike ran very deep and continued for a very long time. One bill of 1593 declared on-sellers of yarn to be 'wanting the fear of God, and caring only for their own private gain'.[3] All of this was predicated on the idea that market traders were also producers: that markets were the means by which small-scale farmers and artisans might sell a little of their surplus produce, or the fruits of their hard labour, to an innocent populace that must be protected from unscrupulous individuals who sought only to make money from other people's hard work. A vague belief that households should be mainly self-sufficient, only buying what they could not produce, also underlay this, along with moral concerns over luxury and consumption, and a sense that financial profit was wrong.

As refreshing as this view might sound today, as we confront nightmare tales of long supply chains and worker exploitation, it was unrealistic even then; rose-tinting the past before it had even really become the past. It ignored the idea that producers might be better off producing, allowing others with more time, inclination and aptitude to act as a bridge between them and the end consumer. It also side-stepped the fact that very few households really were self-sufficient, and that most didn't want to be. Whether you made your own clothes or used a tailor, you still needed to buy cloth and trimmings. And while some grew vegetables or farmed livestock, if you lived in a town, you probably didn't.

Town or country, buying pork or butchering your own pig, you'd doubtless want to enliven plain, home-grown meals. Imported foodstuffs included spices such as pepper, which was readily available and eagerly consumed, not just by the rich,

but also by the middle tier of society – merchants and master craftsmen as opposed to nobles. By the sixteenth century even the upper working classes had the occasional bit of disposable income, working hard to have some extra money precisely to spend on something they didn't or couldn't produce themselves. Buying such goods was fun. They made food taste better and clothes look nicer and made life, in general, more comfortable. Plus, bought goods were expensive and a marker of status, and status has always been a reason to splash the cash.

The fair

In any case, the wholesale trade was not only well established, but even had its own network of markets, or, more properly, fairs. Most regions had one (or more). They were huge events, taking place over several days, and bringing in buyers and sellers from across the country and beyond. For the rich, whether private individuals, or institutions such as religious houses or university colleges, they were important for bulk-buying for the year ahead. Meanwhile merchants with an eye to the dark practice of regrating would also attend, in search of stock to sell on to a wealthy clientele. Expensive, one-off purchases could be made, for the variety of goods on offer was enormous, far beyond the simple market in terms of both quantity and quality. Fairs attracted massive crowds with people travelling for days or weeks to attend, and, while selling was their main function, you'd also expect to enjoy a lot of drinking, eating and general carousing.

Some fairs took place within the city boundaries, spilling out from market squares to invade the whole town. In York, the regulations for the Monday after Ascension Day fair listed the area designated for each type of trader, including: 'Cloth from Leeds, Halifax, Wakefield, Bradford and those parts in the

street from the Common Hall up towards Stayngate [Stonegate]. Cloth from Kendal, Ripon, Knaresborough . . . in the street from Common Hall to Conynstrete [Coney Street]. All goldsmiths, jewellers, vestmentmakers, silkwomen, mercers, grocers and hardwaremen in Petergate . . . all pewters, founders and metallers in Colliergate. All ironmongers and all other ironware in Fossgate. All hatmakers, saddlers, glovers, coopers, turners . . . in Walmgate.' It went on, adding cartwrights, ale sellers, salt merchants, bedsellers, mattress makers, tanners and shoemakers, among others, to the list, and stating firmly that the poulterers must not 'keep their stuff in houses or hostelries, upon pain of forfeiture'.[4] The sense of incipient unruliness lurks just below the surface throughout.

Unsurprisingly, it was easier to hold your fair outside the urban area, in a set location whose spillover potential and mischief-making could include neighbouring fields, rather than the dwellings of the townspeople. Around Stourbridge Common in Cambridgeshire, which by the late medieval period hosted the largest fair in Europe, farmers had to agree to harvest any crops before August 24th or they would simply be trampled beneath the press of feet, hooves and claws.[5] It must have taken the best part of a year for the ground to fully recover – though at least the level of effluent would have provided for free manure.

Fairs were a big part of medieval and Tudor life, but by the seventeenth century, with middlemen more established, and trading conditions in towns changing, they were slowly declining, the stallholders changing from mainly traders to mainly entertainers. Most died out, though some, such as the Nottingham Fair, survived, or were re-established, and exist purely as funfairs today. Some became associated briefly with specific goods – Nottingham has been known as the Goose Fair since at least the 1540s. (If you want modern proof that the spirit of the fair's medieval iteration still lurks beneath, look out for the pulled sugar lollipop known as cock-on-a-stick.)

The market

Back to the everyday, and in the town itself, a royal charter would allow for at least one all-purpose market on one day a week. The ideal was that market traders lived in the surrounds of the town, or had workshops within it, and sold their wares from strictly temporary premises. However, while some sellers were small-scale, selling a few excess eggs or some vegetables only at one local market, others were already more focused on selling, and traded at several different markets across the week. Although food was the biggest element, you could buy almost anything: cloth and shoes, ironmongery and household wares, consumables such as candles – imagine it and someone would try and sell you it. There was also a flourishing trade in used goods and in mending items past their best.

As towns grew, so too did their markets, and zoning became vital, both for the consumer, so that they could easily locate the goods they were after, and the practical functioning of the town. Some trades were particularly smelly, such as fish selling; others were messy, such as butchery. Leatherwork combined both stench and mess, as tanners relied on urine and excrement to tan their hides and were the cause of endless complaints from anyone unlucky enough to be even a vague neighbour. Civic authorities did their best to curb the worst excesses. In Coventry butchers were bound to bury bloody waste outside the city limits while avoiding 'filthy operations', such as singeing stubble off carcasses, within the market area.[6] Markets could be just as hard to contain as fairs, especially as the population grew and the number of traders increased, in recognition of which authorities followed the example set by fairs and laid out where exactly each trader should set up, as well as exhorting them to behave responsibly. In larger towns, the main market

might also be supplemented by auxiliary affairs, specialising in certain goods – think corn, hay, wood and flowers.

London, of course, was the best example of this, as it was by far the biggest city in the country even then. Its markets constantly overflowed from the streets and squares intended to contain them, leading to tension with residents and other road users. One edict laid out that 'all manner of victuals that are sold by persons in Chepe [Cheapside], upon Cornhill and elsewhere in the city, such as bread, cheese, poultry, fruit, hides and skins, onions and garlic, and all other small victuals, for sale as well by denizens as by strangers, shall stand midway between the kennels [gutters] of the streets, so as to be a nuisance to no-one, under pain of forfeiture of the article'.[7] If you were a Londoner, you could find fish and meat at Stocks Market; flowers and vegetables on Cheapside, along with poultry and dairy; more meat, this time from out-of-town sellers, on Newgate Street, and many more.

Visitors were awed at the sheer level of produce which poured into the city, with one commenting that 'it is extraordinary to see the great quantity and quality of the meat – beef and mutton – that comes every day from the slaughterhouses in this city, let alone the meat that is sold at a special market [Leadenhall] every Wednesday for meat brought in from outside the city'.[8] The names of many streets across Britain still reflect their medieval purpose, and even in the much rebuilt City of London you can still walk along Bread Street, Milk Street and Poultry Street. The latter was at one stage known as the even more graphic Scalding Lane (from the habit of scalding poultry with boiling water to slightly melt the fat and enable easier plucking). Smaller towns may have fewer such evocatively named streets, but you don't have to look far to find a Buttermarket, Cornmarket or Shambles. The latter, of which the most famous example is in York, was a meat-selling area, the term

coming from the Old English for table or counter, in this case used for butchery.

By the end of the sixteenth century around 800 towns had a marketplace, and acted, therefore, as local shopping hubs.[9] But don't imagine that the unruliness, mess and annoyance was really confined to only one day a week. While they might have been conceived of as open spaces, with strictly temporary stalls, marketplace stallholders were busy circumventing the rules pretty much as soon as they were in place.[10] Even if a stallholder planned to open only once a week, there were very good reasons to prefer a more permanent selling place than just a table and – if you were lucky – a basic roof under which to find shelter.

Leading the way were butchers who really liked the idea of a permanent shambles, constructed to enable easy sluicing down and access for live animals. In this they were fully supported by landowners, who saw the construction of more permanent structures as a way of increasing rents. If you'd wandered through a market from the fourteenth century onwards, the chances are you'd find a butchers' shambles occupying one end, now with wooden houses. The usual construction had two storeys and secure doors with shuttered hatches and a table for cutting outside on the street. Other traders followed. The attraction was obvious: a fixed premises meant you could lock stock up and keep it on site, rather than having to lug it from a workshop or abattoir. It also meant you could build something which gave a level of protection from the elements for you, your customers and your stock. Infilling of market squares became rife. Opening on more than just market day quickly followed.

It wasn't just traders and private landowners who saw the usefulness of permanent structures (and the potential profits which could be derived via extended opening and higher rates). Civic authorities also got in on the act. Not content with roofed butter crosses, now some towns built larger shelters for temporary stalls. Some were effectively open-sided barns; others had

upper storeys housing guildhalls or courts, or incorporated ground-floor fixed shops.[11] In many towns, the church also built rows of shops on their land (after all, why should the town and local aristocrat get all the glory and rental income?). York has a good example in the shape of Lady Row: one of the earliest surviving examples of a jettied building. Today five tiny shops huddle together under a protruding first floor and long, single roof which parallels the street. As built, there were eleven bays, with the bottom rooms almost certainly occupied by workshops.[12]

None of this was exactly radical. The market may have been the main way in which people shopped, but there were fixed, permanent shops and other facilities surrounding every marketplace. Small, one-room lock-ups within larger buildings had been a feature of towns since the Roman era, usually housing businesses that needed fire, which was not a great idea in an open market made largely from wood; understandably they were often banned. Examples included glassblowing and metalwork, but also one of the other big draws of the high street, the making and vending of cooked food. You could expect any established marketplace to be surrounded by alehouses and taverns (often in cellars), along with bakers and cookshops selling pies and baked goods for take-away and immediate consumption.

Some, possibly most, of these early shops were so in both senses of the word – they sold stuff, but they were also workshops. People were supposed to make things in a workshop and sell them at the market, but they weren't exactly going to turn would-be customers away if they turned up at the shop. Thus, in fixed premises slightly away from the market you could find furniture makers, ironmongers, shoemakers, potters, chandlers (candlemakers), saddlers, buckle makers, wiredrawers, cutlers, hosiers (for hose, long trousers not coming in for a few more centuries), button makers and more. Again, London's makers

Fig. 1.3. Lady Row (Our Lady's Row), Goodramgate, York, built 1316–17, much altered since. This picture was taken *c.* 1893.

and sellers led the way in turning workshops into selling shops and moving the focus for buying away from the market. One visitor in 1500 declared that 'in a single street called "the street" leading to St Paul's there are fifty-two goldsmith's shops, so rich and full of silver vessels, great and small, that in all the shops in Milan, Rome, Venice and Florence together it seems to me you would not find so many of such magnificence as you would find in London'.[13] These weren't just workshops with a selling bench, but properly set-up shops in the full sense of the word.[14]

It was clear that some sellers were not even pretending to be makers, and the vitriol directed against regraters in general became increasingly focused on shopkeepers. One of Elizabeth I's Privy Councillors fulminated against them in 1577, declaring them 'not worthy of the name of merchants, but of hucksters,

of chapmen of choice, who retailing small wares, are not able to better their own estate but with falsehood, lying and perjury'.[15] He was fighting a war which was already lost. By 1600, Norwich, a town of around 12,000 people, already had 111 tailors, 60 grocers, 51 shoemakers, 36 butchers, 18 mercers (silks) and drapers (cloth), 13 barbers, 10 haberdashers, 8 cutlers, 7 apothecaries, 5 fishmongers, 4 goldsmiths, 3 stationers and 2 ironmongers – plus the thriving market.

The shops

What form did these shops and other premises take? They were as varied then as they are now. Many were still the single room lock-up style units you'd have been familiar with at any point over the last few centuries. Some were inserted into (or tacked on to) the ground floors of dwellings built at right angles to the street, on long, narrow plots which might well not have changed since the Romans, or perhaps the Vikings, if they'd settled where you lived. Others were inserts within civic buildings. You might find one room, or more, and those which had infilled the market in particular often had two floors, with the upper floor used for storage – or living space. Still more might be in converted undercrofts or cellars. Then there were selling spaces that were effectively showrooms in merchants' own private houses, accessible only to the wealthy, who might dine or drink with the merchant as part of closing the deal. The rise of such merchants, buying directly from continental suppliers and selling on to the rich, was another reason for the decline of the medieval fairs. Now the aspiring aristocrat could deal with a convenient merchant at any point in the year, no longer having to wait for an annual shindig, or risk rubbing shoulders with the hoi polloi who'd come to drink and not buy serious things for serious money.

Fig. 1.4. 26 Market Place, Lavenham. Built *c.* 1500 as a domestic house, with a shop occupying the front room of the ground floor. The stall boards visible here may originally have been on the inside, forming a counter, moved outside at an unknown date. The building was later converted into a pub and later still (*c.* 1855) a chapel. It is now a National Trust tea rooms.

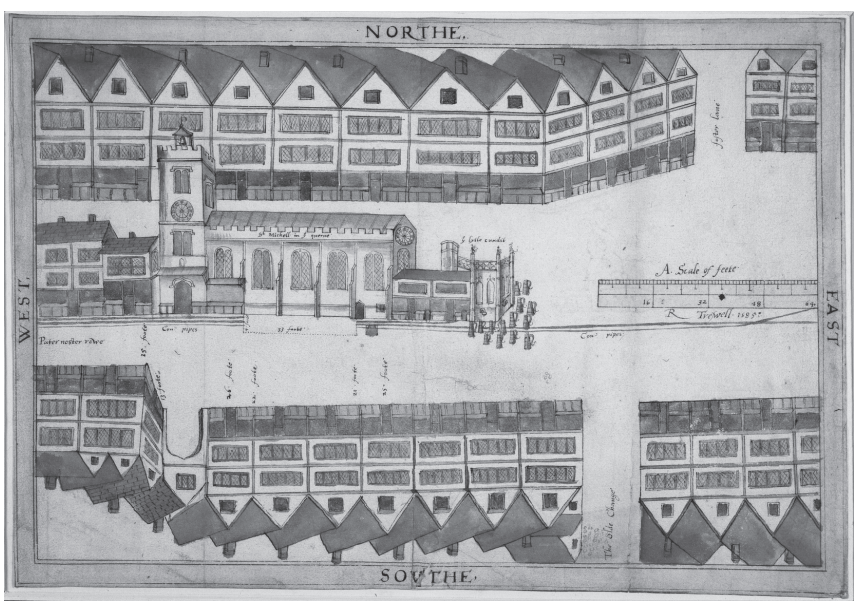


Fig. 1.5. Cheapside, London, 1538. Every house has a bulk (wooden stall) added to the lower storey, with open windows for selling. There are even bulks up against the church, while the buildings to the right may have started as temporary stalls. The ornate structure to the far right of the church is a water conduit, surrounded by jugs.

Very occasionally, small clusters of shops were built which were truly splendid, designed to enable walking, browsing and socialising, as was the case in Chester. The Chester Rows were built somewhere between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and consisted not only of vaulted cellars and ground-floor units, but also of a second storey with a covered walkway forming a gallery containing even more shops.

Given the variety of shops, it's not surprising that the experience of visiting them differed greatly as well. Most were tiny, certainly not intended for a would-be customer to enter. In Lavenham, Suffolk, there was a shop measuring 3.65m by 2.4m (roughly 12ft by 8ft, or around the size of a very short parking space). The units on London's Cheapside were about the same size, though the coveted corner sites could be significantly smaller – down to 1.2m (4ft) square (equivalent to the space taken up by four washing machines).[16] You'd interact with the shopkeeper through the window, which was unglazed, large, and protected at night with sturdy shutters. Larger shops did encourage people to enter, especially where security was a concern, or if you were wealthy and might need to be cosseted a bit, for example in a goldsmiths or spice merchant.

Markets were generally only allowed to trade during daylight hours, another example of the level of distrust surrounding the selling of goods. Light meant visibility – markets tended to be cramped and murky even during the day – which apparently encouraged honesty. Some towns restricted shops to similar hours (or tried to). In general, however, they were open for as long as there was trade. In larger towns, that meant being open for much of the day, making the most of passing trade, as well as encouraging locals to make a special trip, safe in the knowledge that the shop would be open.

The seld

Along with markets and shops on open streets came another experiment in providing a venue for people to trade. First established in the twelfth century but lasting until the sixteenth, meet the seld. Selds were privately owned, and therefore not open to the level of public exhibition and freedom associated with the main high street and market experience. The name was sometimes used to describe long, narrow lines of market stalls, but quickly came to mean a permanent hall containing tens of small booths, each leased to a different trader. They tended to be located behind the main street frontage, found by heading down a narrow alleyway from the shopping area, and while louvres in the roof let in air and some light, they were almost certainly as gloomy inside as any market. However, they were not really intended for the casual wanderer, instead aiming squarely at those in search of something specific. Most specialised in one type of product and therefore occupied a space somewhere between a wholesaler at a fair and a large market trader. In Winchester you could find different selds for wool and linen traders, while in Middlewich, Cheshire, a seld was set aside for traders coming from beyond the immediate region. London had selds for glovers, girdlemakers and leather tanners. Unlike markets, selds weren't primarily about food, though some had cellars, containing the inevitable taverns; they were also open every day.[17]

Selds thrived for around 250 years. However, the underlying idea did not go away. They provided lots of choice to the shopper, and lots of shoppers for the merchants, conveniently grouped under one, permanent, roof; we'll see several different iterations as we travel through the centuries.

The philosophy of shopping

By the early sixteenth century, ideas about shopping were changing. Towns just kept on growing, through both population increase and migration. More permanent residents in a town meant a greater need for vendors to open throughout the week, not just on market day, and not just from a stall. The strict system of controls over selling was crumbling. The medieval guild system, which had governed entry to professions including any form of craft, baking and butchery, was breaking down, and over the next couple of centuries the surviving guilds would become charitable and educational organisations, rather than governing bodies for their respective trades.

Another mark of the changes in society was the end of the sumptuary laws, which had previously laid down who could buy what according to class, therefore restricting the number of potential customers for a wide range of goods. Examples of sumptuary laws include rulings on who could eat turkey and swan (and how many of each), as well as who had the right to wear silk, fur and velvet. They were widely flouted. One London servant, arrested in 1565, was accused of wearing 'a very monstrous and outrageous great pair of hose' (of which sadly no pictorial evidence survives).[18] By the late sixteenth century sumptuary laws were used more explicitly as a stimulus to internal trade: one Act of 1571 stated that all men over the age of six should wear a wool bonnet (cap) on a Sunday. The laws were finally repealed in England in 1604 (it took until 1701 in Scotland). Subsequent attempts to occasionally reintroduce them were more of a thinly disguised way of raising tax, while demonstrating an outward desire to help British industry. Steep fines were levied for flouters, but the rich, eager to be buried in imported silk rather than British wool, were happy to pay.

Underlying the sumptuary laws was a continued moral unease over the consumption of luxury goods, along with the knowledge that luxury often meant imported, and imported meant money leaving the country. But the population who could afford such goods was growing, and the number of potential imports was increasing too. Trade with the Americas was booming, both through Spain and, by the early seventeenth century, directly through the establishment of British colonies. Trade routes to the East had also improved, so there were just more foreign goods around.[19] It became increasingly difficult to disapprove wholly of regrating as a sign of moral depravity, since an Indian calico maker was hardly in a position to journey to Britain to sell his or her cloth, and a trapper just back from Newfoundland didn't necessarily have the skills to sell his own furs directly to the end wearer. Of course, you might still disapprove of the idea of buying the calico in the first place, when a nice Irish linen would do the same thing – except linen wasn't cotton, and calicos were printed, and really much prettier and lighter – and don't you want your wife/daughter/sister/lover to look her finest? They were just one of a burgeoning range of new and interesting things to buy.

If you weren't swayed by a cotton calico, you might still find your head (and purse) turned by tobacco. Tobacco was introduced in the late sixteenth century and quickly became highly desirable, and with it all the accoutrements of smoking, the most obvious of which were pipes. Clay pipes are perhaps the first example of disposable consumer goods: while they were intended for multiple uses, the brittle clay meant they broke easily, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century archaeological digs turn up a multitude of clay pipe stems (which were also used as wig curlers).

Then there was wallpaper, which was enthusiastically seized upon as a way of redecorating in fantastical ways at a relatively reasonable cost. The earliest wallpapers date to the start of

the sixteenth century, but it was in the seventeenth century that they became more popular, a rise which was based on its affordability to middle-class consumers.[20] And, of course, there was food, an area of significant change. By 1600 the slow spread of ingredients from the New World via Spain and Portugal to England meant that culinary delights such as the sweet potato, the standard potato and the Jerusalem artichoke were either reaching, or on the cusp of reaching, British kitchens (all of these were referred to as potato, which is challenging when deciphering contemporary recipes). Other New World imports included turkey and squashes, both of which were rapidly naturalised.

By the mid-seventeenth century, chocolate, tea and coffee were creeping into the diet of the rich, along with pineapples, chillies, tomatoes, plus a lot of new brassicas from Italy. Sugar was planted in Cyprus, Madeira and then the West Indies, and you might also enjoy the increasing availability of previously very expensive spices from Indonesia. Much of this was driven by western European countries including Spain, Portugal and, slightly later, Britain, pursuing aggressive policies of colonialisation and exploitation of foreign lands and workers, an approach which would sadly become the norm by the end of the seventeenth century. This included the introduction of slavery to the New World, which was partly driven by European demand for ever cheaper tobacco and sugar.

All of this led, slowly, to an attitude change. Internal trade, shopping for luxuries, and a focus on selling rather than making and selling were very slowly recast as good, not bad. As we grapple with the environmental and social impact of consumerism today, a lot of these arguments still resonate. Views differ as to how much is too much, to what extent a love of luxury goods is morally wrong, and how to balance the needs of producers with the desires of consumers in an inequitable world. By the end of the seventeenth century some commentators were openly argu-

ing that any economic activity was publicly valuable, setting themselves against the majority who continued to rail against conspicuous consumption, the cash economy and the growth of shopping both as a trade and a leisure activity.

Most notably, in 1714 Bernard Mandeville published *The Fable of the Bees*, subtitled *Private Vices, Publick Benefits*. His arguments went well beyond justifying shopping for pleasure and fed into enlightenment debates over economic theory and the nature of virtue. By pointing out that 'Fickleness in diet, furniture and dress' was, while nominally a vice, also 'the very wheel that turned the trade', he articulated the idea that spending money – buying stuff – was beneficial. He applauded the desire to show off and spend money: 'if none were to drink Wine but such only as stand in need of it, nor any Body more than his Health requir'd, that Multitude of Wine-Merchants, Vintners, Coopers, &c. that make such a considerable Show in this flourishing City, would be in a miserable Condition. The same may be said not only of Card and Dice-makers, that are the immediate Ministers to a Legion of Vices; but of Mercers, Upholsterers, Tailors, and many others, that would be starv'd in half a Year's time, if Pride and Luxury were at once to be banished the Nation.'[21]

He was, at this point, a voice in the wilderness, at least in print, and the debate continued well into the eighteenth century, largely carried out in much-plagiarised polemical rants, plays and occasionally well-reasoned books. If you wished to engage with the debates and read the outpourings of words, you could indulge yourself by buying a range of pamphlets from a bookseller – who was quite possibly no longer printing his or her own books, but simply binding the loose pages and selling the results, making them part of the very nexus of simple retailers that some of the works they were selling criticised so much. But then, as now, most people just got on with it, making peace with any ethical concerns they might have,

according to their desire to engage – or not – with the wider context of their actions.

The war of words didn't really matter. Angry as some writers became, the fixed shop was a *fait accompli* by the time the debates around consumption and easy access to goods beyond the necessitous heated up. Food shopping remained overwhelmingly market-based, but cloth and other less ephemeral items were now much less so. By 1600 even small towns had permanent traders – Wem in Shropshire counted a grocer, five mercers, a draper, a chandler and eight chapmen (a general trader at the bottom of the hierarchy of shopping specialisms). They may well have been trading from very basic premises, but the fact that the probate records of the time listed them at their address by their trade suggests that they kept stock and sold merchandise from that location.[22] Inventory data, which is very rich for the seventeenth century, shows that many shopkeepers kept a great deal of stock. It was one of the reasons they moved towards having a fixed shop in the first place – and increasingly town authorities saw this as potentially beneficial. The medieval trope of the cunning profiteer buying up everything and hoarding it until prices went up was now replaced by the (sort of) public-spirited food trader maintaining enough stores to feed a population in time of trouble. This was, after all, still a time when the plague swept over towns relatively regularly, necessitating lockdowns and curfews, and there was always a perceived risk of starvation if supply lines were too last-minute.

Still, the act of selling goods without making them, and buying out of desire rather than necessity, wasn't afforded acceptance straight away. Moral tensions over wastefulness and luxury lurked in the background, bubbling through into popular discourse before disappearing for a while but never truly dying. A deep-seated distrust of shopkeepers, and fear of being ripped off, underlay much of the discourse on the development of retail. But it was complicated; too much concentration on

the debates around consumption ignores the wider context of the high street, which, by the middle of the seventeenth century, was recognisably a place for far more than just shopping.

Leisure is central to modern definitions of the high street. Yes, there are shops, but we also head there to walk (or jog), to browse, meet friends, and eat, drink and generally make merry. By the seventeenth century some towns – the larger, wealthier ones – inarguably had areas based around retail, but which were used more broadly for leisure. The concept was fraught with class tension: to have leisure time implied wealth, which led back to arguments about frittering away time and money. Worse still, it turned out even the less well-off quite enjoyed spending time around the developing high street, especially since there wasn't actually a need to spend money. How dare they stroll the shops when they should have been working to generate wealth for their employers?! There were opportunities to be had in catering to this nascent leisure market, enticing people who weren't looking to spend money into doing just that. The offerings on our high streets have always been solutions to the challenges posed at each specific time. Let's look at one of the most salient early examples of this: the exchanges of seventeenth-century London.

The exchanges

Visit the Royal Exchange today, and you'll find yourself in a mid-Victorian building, full of high-end shops and a lot of eating places. It's the third iteration of the building, and the only one of four British exchanges to survive. The Royal Exchange was the first to be built, in the 1570s. Its roots lay partly in the selds of the previous centuries, as well as in medieval market halls lined with stalls (or indeed the Roman Forums whose colonnades were filled with trestles and traders). Closer