

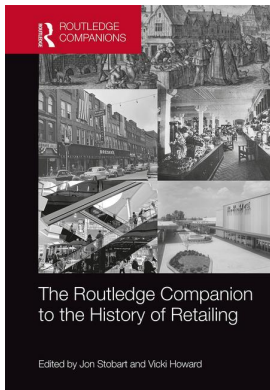
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RETAILING IN THE MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN WORLDS

Christopher Dyer

Introduction: traditional views of retailing in the past

Commerce before the industrial revolution, and particularly before 1500, was once seen as dominated by great merchants typically from such ports as Venice and Antwerp carrying bulky and valuable cargoes over long distances. The traded goods would be for the benefit of the wealthy elite: the rulers, aristocrats, higher clergy, and the patricians of the larger cities. Spices and silks from the east, fine wines from south-west France or the Mediterranean, high-quality cloth made in Ghent and Ypres, and the metal work of south Germany including armour, were the expensive commodities which the courts of Europe required (Spufford, 2002). They would be bought from the merchants by the officials of the grand households. Some producers of prestigious artefacts, such as the painters, sculptors and goldsmiths, would often be employed or commissioned directly by their wealthy patrons. This type of trade was seen as originating around the year 1000 when the emerging urban economy was driven by the demands of aristocrats for luxuries which were traded from afar or manufactured in the towns. Towns expanded as aristocrats increased their spending in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and faltered when the elites suffered losses of income.

In this view of pre-industrial society, the great majority of the population, mainly living from agriculture with a smattering of artisans, were expected to subsist on a few essentials, with a mainly cereal diet. A high proportion of people, it was thought, practised self-sufficiency by growing their own food and gathering from the commons. As much as possible they made their own clothing and agricultural implements. The peasantry are depicted as achieving only low levels of productivity in their farming, which prevented them from setting aside more than a small surplus, and much of that would have been swallowed up by lords and rulers demanding rents and taxes. The mass of the population existed insecurely because of periodic harvest failures. The production and consumption of food took priority, and left little to spare for manufactures such as cloth or utensils. The limited number of exchanges was conducted in weekly markets and annual fairs, at which tolls were collected for the benefit of rulers and lords. The majority of the population found it difficult to accumulate much cash, and exchange often took the form of lending and bartering among neighbours.

Change came about through fluctuations in the human population, which grew up to c.1300, perhaps to unsustainable levels, and then declined after famines and plagues into the fifteenth

century. Recovery in numbers lay behind the economic revival in the sixteenth century, but yet more crises in the seventeenth, including a devastating war in central Europe, ushered in a new episode of uncertainty.

Studies of towns have tended to concentrate on their government, above all by the wealthy merchants and administrators who were anxious to protect the towns' privileges. The majority of the population were taxed and policed in such a way that profit and enterprise were discouraged. From the thirteenth century one of the major industries in the towns of Flanders, Brabant and northern France, clothmaking, was controlled by entrepreneurs who supplied the craftsmen with their materials, and supervised each separate stage of manufacture such as spinning, weaving, fulling, dyeing and finishing. The guilds formed by these artisans, when they were permitted, tended to concentrate on protecting the narrow interests of their members.

The historians' picture of gross inequality, widespread poverty, and low levels of production can be connected to the contemporary moral climate. The catholic church (in effect the only church before the 1520s) endorsed versions of austerity and voluntary deprivation, from the specialised life of poverty professed by the friars, to the universal practice of fasting in Lent and on days of abstinence throughout the year. Merchants who bought cheap and sold dear were regarded with suspicion, and commercial practices such as charging interest on loans were forbidden in the strongest terms. The secular authorities in seeking to control the market and protect the consumer made life difficult for middlemen, and imposed price and quality regulations. Buying goods was apparently surrounded by risks: it was a necessity, and could serve a useful function, but offered few pleasures.

Recent approaches to the history of retailing

The once prevalent view of a bleak pre-industrial past is supported by evidence and has some validity as an interpretation. However, it serves the purpose of those who believe in the overwhelming importance of the industrial revolution to highlight the misery and deprivation experienced before 1700. The exaggeration of backwardness makes the advances of modern civilisation seem all the more beneficial. In revising and modifying the general picture, historians have shown, particularly in the last twenty years, that pre-industrial retail trade was not a trivial or fringe activity, but a central feature of society.

Recent research finds that most trade was regional and local, but not narrowly confined to close neighbours. For example, Cologne in Germany's Rhine valley had a vital relationship with its surrounding district extending as far as 40km to 70km from the city (Eiden and Irslinger, 2000). The city's 40,000 inhabitants (in the period 1340–1750) bought foodstuffs, firewood and timber that had been produced or collected in nearby farms and villages, and in return sold to country people leather goods, textiles and metal utensils made in the city. As well as dealing in relatively low value everyday goods produced in the region, such as grain, Cologne's wider hinterland kept its specialised industry in metal utensils supplied with raw materials, such as iron bars for the city's forges. The citizens' demands for sea fish, wine and large quantities of livestock were satisfied by traders operating at a considerable distance. Smaller towns around Cologne, such as Julich and Neuss, interacted closely with their rural surroundings and would not have had the large city's wide connections.

The character of the trading and retail system can be assessed by noting the number of towns and trading places, the proportion of people living in them and the occupations that they pursued. Towns and markets had proliferated in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and most towns persisted in spite of economic troubles after the Black Death into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Counting small towns as well as large, the total in 1600 in Sweden was

forty-nine, and in Austria eighty-six. The Hesse region in Germany had as many as 138 in the early modern period, and England around 700 (Clark, ed., 1995, pp. 80, 90, 190; Epstein, ed., 2001, p. 32). These figures include not just large towns with populations in excess of 2000, but also market towns with a few hundred inhabitants. Country markets are not included, only those places with a concentration of permanent residents pursuing variety of non-agricultural occupations. The best way of assessing the contribution of towns to the whole society is to calculate the 'urban ratio', that is the proportion of the population living in towns. When this is done at various times between 1350 and 1700, including small towns, the figure is often in the region of 20%, rising to 30% and more in the Low Countries and northern Italy (Clark, ed., 1995, p. 186). In England the figures in 1377–81 and 1522–5 fell below 20% in the more underdeveloped counties, but rose above 25% in Suffolk, in a region noted for its commerce and industry. Towns usually lacked the agricultural resources to support their inhabitants, and instead the townspeople gained a living from intense engagement with trade and manufacture.

As towns grew the transport infrastructure was being developed, above all with the replacement of fords and ferries with bridges, which often included causeways which allowed convenient access to travellers across low lying meadows (Harrison, 2004). Roads were rerouted and improved, and wharfs and waterfronts were built alongside rivers. New channels for waterways were dug, often for the convenience of a monastery, but also for general use (Blair, ed., 2007). Attempts were made to protect road users from crime, such as clearing vegetation from road sides where thieves might lurk, and by arresting and punishing highway robbers. Inns were founded in towns on road junctions, and even out in the country, where travellers and their horses and vehicles could be sheltered securely and provided with food and drink (Hare, 2013). Speedier and more robust horse-drawn carts replaced the clumsy ox wains which had been used in the twelfth century (Langdon, 1986).

The occupations of townspeople leave no doubt about the importance of making relatively cheap goods for a large number of ordinary customers, some of them living in the town, but many from the surrounding countryside. In any English town the food trades figure prominently: bakers, brewers, butchers, fishmongers and cooks. As well as the raw materials for cooking at home customers could buy "ready meals" and "fast food" in the form of pies, pasties, puddings and sauces. Trade in cloth and clothing gave employment to drapers, mercers, tailors, kempsters (dressmakers) cappers and hosiers. People wore and used leather goods, so shoemakers were always prominent, with glovers and saddlers. The list grows with workers in wood, notably coopers and wheelwrights, the metal trades such as smiths and braziers (dealing in copper alloy goods), and the chandlers who made and sold candles. These descriptive labels exaggerate the degree of specialisation, as many townspeople would have a number of sources of income, and would trade in a variety of commodities. Many dealt in at least small quantities of grain, but few people were named as specialist grain traders, and the badgers, bladers or cornmongers tended to be confined to the largest centres. The artisans often kept a shop or stall, selling goods through a window at the front of their house, while making items such as shoes and caps in a workplace at the back. The fishmongers and mercers were buying their stock in bulk from other towns, and selling small quantities to their customers. Some producers would increase their sales by engaging lesser traders to distribute their wares, most commonly the brewers whose ale was sold by gannockers, tippers and the like, who were often female. When we think of retail trade we naturally focus on shops and market stalls, selling goods set out on a board. However a large numbers of consumers were buying services, for example by hiring carpenters and roofers to do work on houses or barns in the town or surrounding villages. Evidence that townspeople were trading goods or services to customers from nearby villages comes from wills and court records which give the names of those who owed money.

The number of artisans and traders, and the mundane character of their produce, shows that most towns were not mainly engaged in supplying luxuries to wealthy aristocrats. Again using England as an example, even small towns might contain a goldsmith or spicer, but these suppliers of expensive high-grade goods and services were greatly outnumbered by the bakers and shoemakers. A minority of peasants or artisans who had made a good living would occasionally buy a silver spoon or a few ounces of pepper. Elite consumers would not be patronising a spicer, tailor or shoemaker in the nearest market town: they would normally take their custom to high status traders in very large towns or London. Purveyors of the most expensive goods, such as vintners or grocers, are rarely found in small towns but instead congregated in ports such as Southampton, or regional centres like Coventry, or the capital. Concentrating on the evidence from smaller towns, if the links between individual rural buyers and urban sellers are plotted on a map, the retailing hinterland is revealed as extending about 12 km from the town.

The artisans and traders selling goods and services to the mass of consumers attract our attention because of their number, and therefore their collective contribution to the economy as a whole. The rich deserve attention because they represent a sizeable proportion of consumer spending. They negotiated their needs with great merchants, but they can be encountered visiting shops and selecting goods. We find Francesco Castellani, a patrician of Florence, in 1459 buying fish for a dinner with guests, and in 1447 he visited a goldsmith to choose twelve silver forks for a wedding present (these were relative novelties, as spoons and knives were the main eating implements of the later Middle Ages) (Welch, 2005, p. 230). In Venice in the sixteenth century, silk was sold in a specially organised display called a *paragon* at which the customers made a choice in enforced silence (Welch, 2005, pp. 123–125). Such luxury purchases made a major contribution to the retailing landscape of the largest towns, from Florence and Venice to London, Paris and Bruges.

The number, size and occupational structure of towns is not the only evidence of the interaction between retailers and a broad spectrum of the population. Inventories of possessions of ordinary people, or bequests made in wills, mostly of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, contain lists of items that could not have been made at home by someone without special skills or contacts with distant markets. Furnishings for example included carpets (that is, table coverings), painted cloths hanging from the walls of principal rooms, bedding, cushions, chairs and chests. In the kitchen would be pots and pans of cast metal, pewter vessels and many other items that would have been bought from suppliers in towns (Overton et al., 2004). This is reinforced by finds from archaeological excavation of rural sites, where cheaper items which are not mentioned in documents include ceramics which would sometimes be made in towns, but more often were the products of a rural industry but distributed through the urban marketing network. By the seventeenth century, superior pots, such as majolica in the Netherlands, were regarded as valuable enough to appear in documents (Baatsen et al., 2016).

Demand for retailers' services

In view of the limited spending power of a high proportion of the population, was there enough demand to enable the retailers to survive? By a paradox shops, market stalls and other retailing outlets were much used by the least affluent section of society, the smallholders, cottagers, labourers and landless wage-earners. They were sometimes paid in grain or with meals, but the cash that they received would have been used to buy food, clothing and other items. Peasants with middling holdings (around 3 to 6 ha of arable) would work part-time for wages if the produce from their land did not suffice for their food needs, so they might have bought from bakers and butchers. Peasants with larger holdings would become customers of retailers if they

chose, as some did, to specialise. For example, peasants in fifteenth-century Worcestershire lived in areas unsuitable for growing oats (in the south of the county) or peas (in parts of the north), so they would buy these crops to feed their livestock (Dyer, 2016). Villagers in late medieval Yorkshire, at Wharram Percy, would also purchase preserved sea fish from remote sources. In many villages there were households which specialised in brewing ale or making cheese, and sold their surpluses to their neighbours, or those seeking better quality foods would go to the retailers in a nearby town. There is limited evidence for peasants making their own cloth or utensils at home: instead they bought their textiles, clothing, shoes, spades and larger implements from specialist artisans, or middlemen dealing in manufactures. Rents and taxes did not absorb all of their surplus, which meant that a tenant with 12 ha might have enough money in a normal year to buy a 10m length of cloth or a cart and its gear. Part-time craftsmen worked in many villages, of whom the smiths are best documented from the twelfth century onwards, but might include tailors or shoemakers. Peasants retailed agricultural produce in towns, not just the men who sold bulky loads of grain and wool, but also their wives and daughters contributed to the household economy by selling eggs, poultry, dairy products, vegetables or fruit from baskets (Dyer, 2000, pp. 126–127).

This story of partial self-sufficiency, meaning that country people were at least occasionally engaged in retail trade both as buyers and sellers, does not apply in the towns, where a minority only would have access to land, and everyone depended on the market for the necessities of life. The demand for food, clothing, fuel and other goods from townspeople, working as artisans and traders, labourers and servants ensured that many retailers were kept busy. In regulating trade at Tarascon in Provence in 1370–1400 priority was given by the authorities to grapes, wine, bread, wheat, oats, barley and salt meat, which were the main purchases of the townspeople. The urban government protected general well-being by encouraging the flow of these foodstuffs into the town, and sought to prevent traders taking these basic commodities out of the town in times of shortage (Hebert, 1979, pp. 163–165).

Retail trade was stimulated by a growth in demand in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and this was possible because of an increase in disposable income. The period has been characterised, initially on the basis of the experience of the Netherlands, by the phrase “industrious revolution”, but this is now regarded as a more general European phenomenon. It is argued that members of households together maximised their earnings, not in order to survive, but to enable them to buy goods which they desired. Women’s work made an important contribution, and that of children, and longer hours were worked so that while daily rates of pay to individuals sometimes declined, annual household earnings rose. Supply and demand moved in a circle, because the efforts of the workers were often devoted to making the consumer goods for which demand was increasing. In England knitted stockings, lace and straw hats were characteristic products of industriousness: they required great quantities of labour, and were sold to a wide spectrum of consumers. English labourers in the seventeenth century spent three-quarters of their earnings on food, but this included some beef and other non-cereal foods, and inventories written after the death of labourers show that during their lives they had bought quantities of textiles, both for clothes and for furnishings such as bed hangings. Most labourers who have left inventories (the upper ranks of their class) owned pewter vessels and chairs (Muldrew, 2011).

In pursuing the question, “was consumption affordable?” historians tend to be drawn into rather speculative calculations of income, based on rates of pay, days in employment, and likely profit from cultivating a number of hectares of land. This mathematical exercise often results in a negative judgement: consumption was not possible. However, this is ignoring the ability of even poor consumers to borrow money, and we have abundant evidence that sellers extended credit to buyers, allowing them to delay payments. In Italy where pawn shops operated more actively

than in northern Europe consumers would buy items such as bed linen when the going was favourable, but in hard times would use these goods to raise money (Welch, 2005, pp. 196–203, 231–235). The trade in second-hand goods ought to be brought into the calculation, as it enabled poorer consumers to afford clothing or household utensils.

Investigating the roots of the growth of consumption, which is apparent at least as early as the thirteenth century and which expanded after 1500, requires posing questions about the decision-making and motives of ordinary people who have left little direct record of their thinking. Were they impelled by a competitive spirit, seeking to own more and better goods than their neighbours? Or were they anxious to live in a style which was appropriate to the status group to which they believed that they belonged? We know so much about the bonds of kinship, and networks among neighbours, demonstrated by such organisations as religious fraternities, that we could suppose that groups of people moved along parallel lines, influenced by their fellow townspeople or villagers, but not necessarily in competition (Rosser, 2015). Some historians have seen a desire among the middling sort and lower ranks of society to emulate the lifestyle of the elite. These ordinary people could not rival the magnificence and splendour of the great aristocrats and churchmen, but they could borrow some customs and emblems of affluence such as household textiles or spiced food, in a movement towards the “democratization of luxury”, or a desire among townspeople to “live nobly”, both phrases applied to changes in the consumption patterns in the Netherlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Perhaps these desires could have been generated within non-aristocratic society, without the need to aspire to matching upper-class role models. Ideals of convenience, comfort, enjoyment of colour and pursuit of pleasure could have been regarded positively by those who were acquiring the means to buy goods beyond the reach of their predecessors.

Who made the decisions to spend, and then what specific items to buy? The evidence is not consistent, as the account books and correspondence of upper-class Italians in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries show the domination of the male head of household. Such individuals were often older than their wives, and society frowned on women going into the market place on their own, so men did not just decide to buy, but went to the shops to make the purchase (see above p. 18). In northern Europe in the same period women were more often seen as partners, who could participate in collective decisions. Women might have their own source of income, through a craft or trade of their own, which increased their capacity for independent judgements about purchases (Howell, 2010, pp. 93–144).

The rise of retailing gives us an insight into one dimension of a society in which individuals were developing self-confidence and a greater degree of independence. Particularly after 1350, when the fall in population gave scarce tenants and workers more bargaining power, the power of lords diminished and families exercised less control over the young. Both before and after the Black Death, evidence for travel, migration, political and religious consciousness tell us that people of all kinds had wide horizons. They knew about the kingdom or lordship in which they lived, and about remote places of importance, such as Rome and Jerusalem. They were also aware of the places where the best bargains could be found, or where, if they were selling goods, the demand was greatest and the prices highest.

The location of retail trade: shops and shoppers

The settings in which retail trade took place varied over time, place and commodity. In the early Middle Ages, people gathered in remote places, and left behind a dense scatter of coins and metal objects apparently mislaid by the traders and their customers. For example at Cottam in east Yorkshire on the site of a farmstead significantly sited on a long-distance trackway more than

a hundred metal objects, mostly belt fittings, have been found, together with thirty-five knife blades and twenty-five coins of the eighth and ninth centuries. Such a concentration of objects would not normally be associated with an agricultural settlement (Richards, 2003). In the later Middle Ages fairs were trading occasions which were held annually, often to coincide with a religious festival, and their timing gave them a specialist purpose. Local fairs were held for the sale of livestock in May and June, or cheese and butter at the end of the summer. They were also opportunities for retail trade, such as purchases of wooden household utensils for people living within a few miles. In the thirteenth century a network of international fairs across Europe, such as the fairs of Champagne, or those held at St Ives (Huntingdonshire) or Stourbridge near Cambridge in England, had become opportunities for merchants to meet and conduct wholesale transactions. Cloth often figured prominently among the goods that changed hands, but almost any high value commodity traded over distances, such as furs and wax from the Baltic, spices from Asia and Mediterranean dried fruits and nuts could be on offer at the temporary booths erected on the fairground. Royal courts bought bales of cloth, and bishops and rich monasteries acquired their spices and preserved fish at fairs. These rich consumers could acquire goods in the large quantities that they needed, and at reasonable prices. In some countries fairs gradually lost importance as more deals were struck in cities in merchants' houses or in public buildings where traders congregated. At the French city of Reims, the drapers sold cloth from the ground floor of their houses in the city centre, and customers wanting linen would find it being sold in a mercery where the linen merchants gathered (Desportes, 1979, pp. 371–375). The need for fairs revived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when states and cities developed new networks focused on fairs such as those held at Geneva and Medina del Campo in Spain (Epstein, 2000, pp. 73–88).

Retail trade was focused on towns in the period 850–1320, both in weekly markets and shops which opened daily. A typical set of market privileges in Scotland was issued by the king for Dumbarton in 1221, establishing the market day as Wednesday, and exempting the burgesses of Dumbarton from paying tolls on their transactions anywhere in the Scottish kingdom. In addition, all those bringing merchandise to buy and sell in the market “shall have my peace”, that is come under royal protection (Ballard and Tait, ed., 1923, pp. 246, 254, 271).

Towns required extended space for market places. These often consisted of wide main streets, which could accommodate rows of market stalls and still allow room for traffic. Alternatively a larger rectangular or triangular space was created, with ample room for stalls and other structures. If they were being planned after the town centres had filled with dense housing and churches, as at Florence and Bologna, buildings were cleared away, though sometimes market places were sited on the edge of the town. In south-western France the early market places (in the eleventh and twelfth centuries) lay within the walls of the castle, where the traders could be protected, but also dominated and exploited by the lord. This limited space was abandoned and the market was typically held near a church, or even in the churchyard in the thirteenth century, which would be in a more central and convenient place. In the Hundred Years War the market moved back into the security of the castle, but with the return of peace in the mid fifteenth century migrated once more into the town (Petrowiste, 2004, pp. 176–194).

The typical English urban market place contained many stalls, ideally consisting of trestles, boards and awnings which could be dismantled and stored until the following week, but some stallholders turned their temporary booths into permanent structures with upper stories, or rows of stalls were built by the authorities. A monumental stone cross would occupy a prominent place, and its steps would be appropriated on market day by groups of traders who could not aspire to open a stall, such as women selling butter from baskets. An official building would serve as a toll booth, and be provided with a hall for courts to meet. Here a pillory would stand as a

deterrent for those offending against the rules on weights and measures or product quality. Part of the toll booth or town hall, or a purpose-built market hall would serve as a covered market, where traders would be better protected from rain. Specific groups of traders might be assigned buildings, such as the shambles for the butchers. In English and French towns would be a drapery and mercery for the sale of cloth, and Flemish towns such as Ypres had cloth halls. Even without these designated spaces for trade, occupational groups tended to occupy the same streets, like the linen sellers of seventeenth-century Amsterdam who set up their shops in Nieuwendijk (Lesger, 2011). In the market place at the small town of Newmarket in Cambridgeshire separate groups of stalls were assigned (at least in name) to the mercers, drapers, ropers, cheesemongers and shoemakers (Davis, 2012, p. 280).

A great quantity of trade passed through the larger urban market places, but they usually were held for one day in the week, while the permanent shops opened most days. They were often located on the ground floor of houses fronting on to streets, though some occupied wooden structures leaning against buildings, including churches. The “shoprows” are often found in or near market places, with a dozen or so lock-up shops in a terrace. Selds were similar structure, not unlike small-scale shopping malls, in which customers walked along a covered passageway with small shops on either side. The size of this type of shop was very small, often less than 2 metres wide. Some consisted of a board, chest or hutch like the fishmonger’s stall in Reims which measured 8 feet by 4 feet (Desportes, 1979, p. 373). Modern tourists can gain a sense of the high density of retail spaces in a prime city centre location by walking across the Ponte Vecchio in Florence. The larger shops displaying a merchant’s wares would be built to impress, like the draper’s premises in Toulouse where a large vaulted room of four bays with brick arches occupied the street frontage of a merchant’s house (Wolff, 1954, p. 515). In less prestigious retail outlets goods could be displayed in a window, or on a “stall board” jutting out into the street and covered with an awning. A customer visiting a shoemaker’s house would be shown at the front of the shop an array of goods by a salesperson, often the artisan’s wife, but would also be able to see in the background the craftsman at work. The shop would be equipped with a counter and a chest or chests for storing stock. At the end of the day the shop would be “shut” by lifting or removing the stall board and locking the shutters across the window (Clark, 2000). A less common type of retail premises can be found in towns with stone-built undercrofts with access to the street. In these basement rooms in Southampton for example wine would be sold, but other goods could also have been available for purchase (Figure 2.1).

Shops were numerous and concentrated in particular streets, demonstrating the importance of the retail sector. In Chester the space for shops was greatly increased by building on the frontage of the main streets rows of shops along a walkway on the first floor, in addition to those conventionally available at street level. Oxford had 147 shops listed in the survey of 1279 (and there were probably more); and in 1417, 118 shops were located along the High Street of Winchester. These were dwarfed by the retailing capacity of London, with 4000 shops in Cheapside (the main shopping street, the Oxford Street of its day) in about 1300 (Keene, 1990). The flow of trade through these shops, stalls and chests should not be underestimated. Around 1300 in Cheapside tenants of shop premises were willing to pay an annual rent above £1, even as high as £4, at a time when a labourer was paid not much more than £1 per annum. The quality and quantity of shops varied from one street to another, and the most prized location was a corner shop where two busy streets met, preferably near the market place.

Other points of sale could be found in the towns, such as the hawkers and huxters selling from baskets in the street or going from door to door. Outside the town markets were held in the countryside, and while some were quite small and inactive, others had stalls and shambles, and generated a revenue in tolls which suggests quite a high volume of trade. Shops could still



Figure 2.1 Early sixteenth-century shop, Lavenham in Suffolk, England
Source: Courtesy of Abby Antrobus.

be encountered in villages, especially those with a market or acting as a place where trade was focused, such as the Huntingdonshire village of Yaxley in the fourteenth century, a port on the system of inland waterways in the fenland. In seventeenth-century Cheshire a scatter of village shops identified as mercers, drapers and grocers are revealed by lists of their stock to have carried a great variety of merchandise, which was supplied by traders active in nearby towns (Stobart, 2016, pp. 89–102). Some of these shops were located in villages which were not particularly large or important. In both town and country bargains were often struck in inns, though these could belong in the category of wholesale rather than retail trade.

Country dwellers bought from peddlers or chapmen. They were often based near a town, and having obtained their packs of assorted goods from urban suppliers, walked or less often took a pack horse from village to village. They gained a bad reputation, especially during episodes of moral panic about vagrants, but their customers welcomed the opportunity to buy haberdashery, pins, gloves, kerchiefs, beads and combs (Davis, 2007). Their numbers grew in the seventeenth century, and when they were licensed in 1697, 2,559 were listed in England. They sold a great miscellany of goods, but a very prominent element were textiles, that is linen and cotton rather than woollens, and haberdashery, and so were providing country wives with the materials for making clothes at home. The combined value of their annual sales in the late seventeenth century could have exceeded £100,000, which amounts to a significant proportion of the country's commercial exchanges (Spufford, 1984).

The regulation of retail sales, both in markets or shops, were designed to maintain order, as those in authority wished their markets to be peaceful and well-conducted. Shops were distrusted on a number of grounds, mainly because it was believed that honesty was most likely if transactions were conducted in an open public market. In Paris from the late twelfth century, second-hand clothes dealers were regarded with suspicion, as the trade was believed to have links with thieves who were disposing of stolen property (Geremek, 1987, pp. 263–269). Middlemen also attracted criticism, as it was feared that they forced up prices. Legislation forbade forestalling, that is intercepting goods on their way to market in order to sell them at a higher price. Regrating was also outlawed, as this meant acquiring produce, especially foodstuffs, in order to sell at a higher price. Cooks and innkeepers were distrusted as they bought meat and fish, cooked them as ingredients in meals, and made a profit from the diners. The authorities dreamt of an ideal of honest producers, of fruit and vegetables for example, travelling to market to sell direct to the consumers. In the real world a network of middlemen handled goods of all kind: even in the apparently simple world of horticulture leekmongers and garlicmongers bought up sacks of vegetables and passed them on to retailers. We now see this as an aspect of efficient distribution, and regard middlemen as playing a necessary role in keeping commodities flowing along the complex commercial chain (Davis, 2012).

The authorities in towns were especially concerned to protect consumers from exploitation by food traders, which led them to restrict price rises and therefore to impose limits on the profit margins of brewers and butchers. Bakers in England were especially closely regulated, by the assize of bread which laid down the weight of loaves which were sold for fixed prices of 1d., a halfpenny and a farthing. In a bad harvest year, as the price of grain rose, the weight of the loaf was reduced according to a sliding scale. The consumers were getting less bread for their money, but at least the bakers were not making excessive profits, and the rules were known to the public and regarded as fair. Similar measures were adopted on the continent, as is shown by the fining of 30 traders at Ypres in Flanders in 1267–8 for selling loaves that were either small or of low quality (van Uytven, 2001, pp. 90–91).

The town governments ensured that weights and measures were checked, and in some markets the price of grain was set by the town authorities. Trading days were regulated, and shops

were not supposed to open on specified religious holidays. Trade began at an agreed time, with the ringing of a bell. Often the early part of the day was reserved for domestic consumers, to prevent merchants buying the grain or bread and selling at an extra profit. Residues at the end of the day, such as unsold fish, were reserved for the poor. Credit was subject to intervention by the local courts, and in particular customers could be compelled to pay their debts. In general such strong measures were not used frequently, because the trading system depended on trust and a sense of mutual obligation.

Market places lay at the heart of the town, and the markets were the focus of the commercial economy, both for the major traders such as drapers and the mass of consumers buying necessities. The market place also occupied a central position in the civic consciousness of the townspeople, as it was the site of the town halls and other civic buildings. In Italian cities the *podesta* and the captain of the people might have their palaces there, and in both southern and north European cities a high bell tower with a clock symbolised the inhabitants' sense of identity. Here townspeople gathered to attend meetings and celebrations, to hear proclamations and to witness judicial punishments. The town's militia would assemble in the market place in times of troubles, and rebels would gather in the same place (Bocchi, 2015).

All of this suggests a cohesive system designed to promote the common good. As is often the case apparently benevolent motives are found to be combined with self-interest. The authorities had to be seen to protect the consumer, or otherwise they feared disturbances, and occasionally food riots erupted in years of shortage, when crowds broke open granaries and mills and sold the grain at a "fair" price. In years without extreme shortages a well-regulated food market gave the wage-earning section of the population no excuse to ask for higher wages. An example of market rules with mixed motives can be found at Liege in the Middle Ages. In this town with many consumers, 20,000 in 1500, many of whom were wage-earners, markets were to be held in daylight, that is under public scrutiny, and townspeople were given priority in their purchases. However, the bishop of Liege and the canons of the cathedral, who had large landed estates, were given monopolies at certain times for their profit. The consumer protection measures were frequently announced, but there is little evidence for their enforcement (Wilkin, 2015).

Much of the governance of marketing, and our evidence for actual sales, suggests a relatively straightforward relationship between towns and the surrounding countryside. Towns and markets were widely spaced, often at least 20 km apart, and hinterlands based on convenience of travel defined the area from which country people went to market to sell their produce and make purchases. Only in some places and periods was such a relationship compulsory, for example when the state gave a town a monopoly on trade, or when, as in Italy, rural producers were compelled to sell their grain in the market of a town that ruled over the surrounding countryside. Normally the rural population had a choice between markets and towns, which competed for trade. They might sell their produce in a local market town, which would then sell it on to a larger place, as happened when wine grown in southwestern France was ultimately gathered at Bordeaux for export. Traders in a large town dealing in a specialist imported commodity, like the dye needed by rural cloth makers, would distribute it through the smaller market towns. A striking example of the connection between large towns practising an international trade and local consumptions comes from the marriage contracts of peasants living around Vic in Catalonia in c.1300. These documents might specify that a young woman's trousseau would include a dress made from cloth from towns in northern France and Flanders, such as Bruges, Chalons or Ypres. These textiles would have been sold by retailers in towns like Vic, but their ultimate origin in a famous textile centre was not forgotten (To Figueras, 2016).

Changes in retail trade in the long term

The economic and social history of Europe is reflected in changes in retail trade. Little detailed evidence survives for shopkeeping in the generation of towns that grew in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. An English riddle refers to a garlic seller, allowing us to glimpse a street hawker at work. The archaeology of the period offers evidence for trade between town producers and rural consumers in the form of small metal dress fittings and brooches made by urban artisans but found in the countryside (ten Harkel, 2013).

The great expansion of towns and markets in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, which was associated with thousands of new shops, stalls and other places for sale, embedded marketing into social relations throughout much of Europe. In the period 1350–1500, when the population declined and the overall volume of trade was reduced, towns shrank in size, but so did the villages, so the proportion of the population living in towns did not change a great deal. Plenty of shops remained in business, and industry continued to supply demand, for cloth for example. A French commentator on the period remarks on the increased range of commodities, the extension in the range of social groups who were able to participate in consumption, and the development of fashion (Petrowiste, 2018). Although the numbers of consumers everywhere was reduced, incomes of individuals were rising as holdings of land grew in size and wages tended to increase. Those active in industry had to respond to shifts in demand, such as the potters who made vessels for drinking, both cups and jugs, as individual consumption of alcoholic drinks rose.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, population growth resumed, production in the countryside increased and prices rose. A number of sections of society, such as better-off peasants, did well in this environment, and although real wages fell, the “industrious revolution” enabled the households of smallholders to increase their earnings. Calculations of English GDP and consumption per head suggest that after some wavering after 1520, both increased decisively in the late seventeenth century (Broadberry et al., 2015, pp. 206, 297). In the Netherlands, in its Golden Age, households acquired “turned” furniture (that is parts of chairs and other items were finished on a lathe) and a more varied range of textiles and household goods were acquired.

The facilities for trade changed. Shops became grander and more important features of the city landscape. In Madrid in the late sixteenth century, at the centre of a unified state and a great empire, the Plaza Mayor was planned as an imposing centrepiece of the city. The central square was used as a food market, and bread and meat were sold from specially designed buildings, but the colonnades of the main structure contained shops selling luxury goods to a wealthy clientele (Escobar, 2007). London by the end of the seventeenth century had grown to become one of the largest cities in Europe, and was developing as an imperial centre with trade links across the Atlantic, and to the Far East and Muscovy. Its shopping facilities grew in size and sophistication with the building of arcades (as we would call them) or galleries, of which one of the most celebrated was the New Exchange, opened in 1609. These shopping venues were built as investments by aristocrats with spare land in central London, in the case of the New Exchange by the earl of Salisbury who owned the site on the Strand. Within the building large numbers of small, specialist shops, selling high-quality goods, were built in line beside a walkway, along which the customers could inspect the wares and negotiate purchases. They were assured that their fellow shoppers were exclusive and well-behaved because a beadle monitored those passing through the door. There was a good chance that visitors would meet friends and associates, so the galleries served a social as well as a commercial function (Walsh, 2003).

In reviewing the economic importance of retail trade there is a tendency to see shops and their wares as secondary symptoms of growth. This view presumes that production was the

prime mover in the economy, from which consumption followed. Yet the cumulative total of retail trade could play an important role in forming the great chain of interactions that made up an economy, and consumer demand could act as a general stimulant. Analysing demand from the perspective of the purchaser leads us to explain their motives in terms of competition or emulation, but we should take note of feedback from the retailer. Shopkeepers tempted customers, offered attractive items, set standards of consumption, informed customers about products, including novelties and encouraged them to indulge their ambitions. Tailors in particular persuaded their customers to adopt new fabrics and styles.

The culture of retail

Sales in shops and markets served a useful purpose, in that households satisfied their needs, and shopkeepers made a profit, but retail trade was not entirely functional. Markets and fairs were public occasions which often included an element of display and even entertainment. The opening of fairs could involve some ceremony. The fair usually coincided with a saint's day, perhaps a local saint who was commemorated with processions and religious services. Flemish authorities in the sixteenth century who wished to promote their market would hire musicians and organise displays of flowers (Stabel, 1997). Entertainers wishing to make money would attend markets and fairs on their own initiative and give displays of juggling or music, and a dancing bear might be exhibited. Attendance by local sellers and buyers at markets would change seasonally, with increased activity before or soon after the great feasts of Christmas, Easter and Whitsun. Those attending would drink, and some stalls would tempt buyers into making frivolous or trivial purchases – of playing cards, ribbons, children's toys, pots decorated with comical faces, or in the seventeenth century, chapbooks. Contemporary literature celebrates the pleasures of the fair. A Welsh poet of the fourteenth century imagined events at a fair at Rhosyr (Newborough on Anglesey), where young men wore goat skins and horns (symbolic of lechery), and well-dressed people attended, including a young woman who rejected the poet's advances. He had been drinking wine (Fulton, 2012).

For Italian painters of the sixteenth century the displays of goods at markets carried meanings beyond the simple temptation to purchase. The artists depicted market stalls, as a metaphor for abundance, well-being and happiness. Fruit and vegetable stalls with their mass of colourful produce hinted at sensuality and fecundity. Attractive women were shown in attendance, and there were hints of sinful conduct (Welch, 2005, pp. 65–68). Throughout Europe women played an important role in the management of stalls and shops. The wives of the artisans promoted sales by standing outside the shop in the street to lure customers, and then used their feminine wiles (as contemporaries alleged) to persuade them to buy. They would presumably have adopted a different approach with the high proportion (in northern Europe) of female shoppers.

Sales were promoted in ways that resonate with modern practices. Goods were not branded, but there were close associations between particular places and their distinctive products. In England, Thaxted knives, Kendal cloth and Banbury cheese all attracted instant recognition among fifteenth-century consumers. Clothes, hats and head coverings, shoes, jewellery and metal dress accessories all changed style quite rapidly, and some cities such as London and Paris led the way and were much imitated. Fashion consciousness was widespread, and peasant clothes reflected new styles. Advertising through the medium of print appears in the late seventeenth century, with a leading role being taken by patent medicines.

A visit to shops could have been an opportunity for people to meet, converse and conduct business. Galleries such as the New Exchange in London became an important part of the

social scene for the elite, as Pepys's diary shows in the 1660s. But shops always lay on the edge of respectability, offering opportunities for customers to flirt with the shop girls, and the New Exchange eventually gained a reputation as a centre for prostitution.

Conclusion

Any discussion of retail trade leads historians along an optimistic route that gives an impression of the early onset of modernity, and tempts us to overestimate the affluence that was possible in a pre-industrial economy. The moralists of the time condemned the frivolity and waste arising from following fashion. Critics with some justice warned that buying excessively expensive and often trivial goods was self-indulgent and exposed all those involved to moral dangers. The traders cheated, and the customers had suspect motives as they were tempted by the sins of pride, avarice, envy, gluttony and lechery. Sumptuary laws were passed in order to maintain social distinctions based on the quality of clothing, or to limit perceived damage to the economy from expensive foreign imports.

Those who emphasise the limitations of the pre-industrial economy, whose views were expressed at the beginning of this chapter, have a point when they say that surpluses were insufficient to generate a very large retail sector. In particular there were regions with sparse populations and poor communications, such as Norway, where towns were few and small, and the rural population could not afford to buy consumer goods in quantity. In the more developed areas wealth was very unevenly distributed, and some groups such as unskilled labourers around 1300 had very limited spending power. Throughout the whole period a substratum labelled as "poor", estimated sometimes at 5% of the population, were excluded from the world of retail, except for buying basic supplies of food. If their clothes resembled those of their neighbours, it would have been the result of charitable gifts, or purchases of second-hand garments. Retailing did not expand continuously, though it seems in the late seventeenth century to have embarked on a long-term upward movement. Before that there were many short-term ups and downs, including slumps lasting decades, affecting England in the middle years of the fifteenth century, and the Low Countries towards the end of the same century. In years when harvests were deficient, consumer spending would have been reduced, and trade was also highly seasonal, with more activity in the period after the harvest and at Christmas than in Lent or early summer.

Retailing was born and grew up in the medieval and early modern periods, but its childhood was uncertain and insecure.

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