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**The Village Shop and Rural Life in Nineteenth-Century England:
Cultural Representations and Lived Experience**

Submitted for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
At the University of Northampton

2015

Lucy A. Bailey

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Dedicated to my late grandmother, Dorothy Anne Highwood,
a farmer's wife and villager.

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Abstract

Despite consumption and retailing having grown to form a meta-narrative in historical enquiry, the village shop has largely escaped attention. Remarkably little is known about the long-term development of rural services, particularly shops, which are often ignored as marginal and un-dynamic. Moreover, whilst their recent decline has highlighted their perceived importance to the vitality of village life, the extent to which this is based on a romanticised or historically myopic image is unclear. This thesis seeks to rectify this lacuna by critically assessing the real and imagined role of the shop and shopkeeper within village life during the nineteenth century, in terms of supplying goods and services, integrating and representing community as a place and a network of people, and projecting images of the rural into the wider national consciousness. It adopts an innovative interdisciplinary approach and offers an integrated analysis of a wide range of visual, literary and historical sources: from paintings and serialised stories to account books and trade directories. Central to the argument is a sustained interrogation of the shifting historic construction of the village shop and its keeper, from exploitative and anti-rural to the epitome of a nostalgic and sentimentalised view of England's rural communities. This is compared to the lived experience, as established from the historical record, quantitative analysis conducted at both village and county level. This synthetic approach has required the amalgamation of multiple perspectives: writer and artist; reader and consumer; observer and participant; patron and critic; shopkeeper, customer and villager. The thesis inputs into debates relating to the commercial history and cultural understanding of rural communities, the findings broadening our understanding of the history of rural retailers and the communities they served, shedding light on rural consumption and how changing attitudes to retailing, rural communities and the countryside were developing. It also contributes to other key areas of research including the notion of community (places and networks) and cultural representations of people, place, space and everyday life.

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Abbreviations

BLA	Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service
CBS	Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies
GAr	Gloucestershire Archives
KHLC	Kent History and Library Centre
MERL	Museum of English Rural Life
NRO	Northamptonshire Record Office
P.O.	Post Office
SRO	Suffolk Record Office

Introduction

The last two hundred years have seen fundamental changes to the demographics and dynamics of village communities, which have led to present day attempts to assess and determine the character and fate of villages. Retrospective rhetoric has emerged, centred around the perceived decay of traditional rural life and the demise of village crafts and trades, which denounces the intrusion of the modern world and seeks to restore and protect the time-honoured essence of village life. More specifically, it aims to champion the plight of local shops, village communities urging their members to ‘use it or lose it’ and government policy, in the form of rural rate relief, aiming to maintain services at a local level because it is believed that without them a village becomes little more than a commuter dormitory.¹ Such interpretations present a fundamental problem, as Stobart has suggested, as they ‘are based on a particular reading - an idealisation - of the history and historical geography of rural service provision. At its heart lies a romanticised image of a golden age of rural life, of independent and thriving village communities and of a set of services firmly embedded within those communities’.² This draws on an entrenched, idealistic, almost mythological sentiment towards the countryside which is deeply rooted in our value system and has a powerful influence on the way we treat our cultural landscape, hence the desire to protect rural services and halt erosion.³

Over the years nostalgia appears to have swept up the village shop and firmly established its cultural image; it is so clearly defined that one author has suggested that it could be ‘bottled’ as an ‘essence’: ‘A bell rang as she stepped inside. The air was deliciously warm, with an aroma that always prompted a smile: a cosy blend of bread rolls, sliced ham, newsprint and mailbags. The kind of smell you’d like to bottle for nostalgia. Essence of village store.’⁴ Even for those who may never have set foot in a rural shop, the strength of this kind of romanticised image, heavily steeped in nostalgia, can still evoke feelings of familiarity. Modern perceptions of the village shop

¹ There is a general consensus that a substantial number of village shops are lost every year due to a number of factors including the increased mobility of shoppers, the growth of internet shopping and large superstores. It has been a cause of widespread concern, even capturing the attention of The Duke of Edinburgh, as revealed in an interview for *Shooting Times & Country Magazine* in 2009, www.shootinguk.co.uk (date accessed 28/01/15). Commission for Rural Communities, ‘Rural Disadvantage: Reviewing the Evidence’ (September 2006), 106-7; Commission for Rural Communities, ‘The Economic Significance of Post Offices Combined with a Village Shop: Final Report’ (June 2007), 19-20.

² Stobart, J., ‘Food Retailers and Rural Communities: Cheshire Butchers in the Long Eighteenth Century’, *Local Population Studies*, 79 (2007), 23.

³ Bunce, M., *The Countryside Ideal: Anglo-American Images of Landscape* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 1.

⁴ Bale, T., *Skin and Bones* (London: Preface, 2008), 4.

also include the supposition that it is a multifarious general store, often linked to the post office. For example, in *The Village Shop*, a book by Lin Bensley, whose parents and grandparents ran a village shop, there is a suggestion that it was the general store which represented the ‘traditional shop we recognise today’.⁵ Yet at what point did it become traditional? Where did the process of rendering the general village shop a national treasure begin and was it always so well regarded?

Much of our nostalgic attachment to the village shop has been fostered by a cultural heritage which celebrates rural life. It is generally regarded to have always lain at the heart of the village community, not only a place to buy goods or access services, but to meet, interact and gossip, a site of personal social exchange. In that regard it has been described as an ‘icon’, perceptions of its function and significance reaching beyond its retail role. It is widely regarded as important to the vitality and integrity of communal life and forms part of the identity of a rural community.⁶ Such is the strength of this cultural image that it can be found as far afield as Canada, the old-fashioned country general store being described as ‘warm, inviting and ever-open’, providing ‘a popular meeting place for those living in small, isolated communities’, which remains part of the mythology of the Canadian frontier.⁷ Shops are therefore seen as central to what a rural community is and what it should be: a dense web of personal social interactions.⁸ Indeed, many modern cultural representations of the village shop, whether sentimental or satirical, reflect perceptions of its social function and ability to draw the community together, which in some instances has helped to secure its future (Figure 1.1). Such is the village shop’s appeal that various publications have emerged over the last fifty years which are dedicated to celebrating its social role alongside its commercial significance. Generally based on oral history and reminiscences, they tend to focus on the twentieth-century history of rural retailing and are aimed at a non-academic audience, appealing to those interested in local, rural or community history and heritage

⁵ Bensley, L., *The Village Shop* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010), 15. Wikipedia also stereotypes the village shop as a type of general dealer with ‘a general line of merchandise’, www.wikipedia.org/wiki/General_store (date accessed 28/01/15).

⁶ Scarpello, T., Poland, F., Lambert, N., and Wakeman, T., ‘A Qualitative Study of the Food-related Experiences of Rural Village Shop Customers’, *Journal of Human Nutrition and Dietetics*, 22, 2 (2009), 111.

⁷ Benson, J., ‘Small-scale Retailing in Canada’ in Benson, J. and Shaw, G. (eds.), *The Evolution of Retail Systems c.1800-1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), 92-3. For more information on the Canadian rural general store see: Craig, B., *Backwoods Consumers & Homespun Capitalists: The Rise of a Market Culture in Eastern Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), chapter 5.

⁸ Shops have remained important in rural areas, particularly for vulnerable groups such as ‘the elderly, low income and less mobile members of the community’, not only in the provision of goods and services but as ‘an informal social contact point’, the post office, identified as ‘a key source of regular information and advice’. Links between community cohesion and village facilities have been established, the village shop perceived to be significant as a meeting place and for community identity. ‘Rural disadvantage’, 100-3; ‘The Economic Significance of Post Offices’, 23, 27; Scarpello et al., ‘A Qualitative Study’.



Fig 1.1 Cartoon entitled “A rota system IS being worked out – but meanwhile, can we help you, madam?” depicting Itteringham Village Store. 1994. Tony Hall. Source: Original cartoon displayed in Itteringham Village Shop (image courtesy of Mike Hemsley and Tony Hall).

or those simply looking for a nostalgic trip down memory lane.⁹ Many deliberately seek to highlight the recent decline in rural retailing, Bensley’s book, as well as another by Brown and Ward, also entitled *The Village Shop*, having a particular tone and agenda which is closely aligned to the advocacy of contemporary rural community interests, the latter acknowledging the need for further research:¹⁰

Discovering their past is not a straightforward task: records are few, and detailed research has barely begun...A theme central to this account is the way in which village shopkeeping

⁹ For example: Turner, S., *Over the Counter: A Year in the Village Shop* (London: Macdonald, 1960); Jaques, F., *Our Village Shop* (London: Heinemann Young Books, 1983); Starr, F., *A Village Shop* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1979); Brown, J. and Ward, S., *The Village Shop* (Moffat: Cameron & Hollis, 1990); Wheeler, H., *Half a Pound of Tuppenny Rice: Life in a Yorkshire Village Shop* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1993); Russell, S., *Shelf Life: Reflections from a Village Shop* (Cirencester: Tigwin Publications, 2000); Wheeler, H., *Living on Tick: Tales from a Huddersfield Corner Shop Between the Wars* (Stroud: Amberley Publishing, 2002); Read, R. (ed.), *Remembering Village Shops: A Study of Combe Down from the Collected Memories of Residents* (Combe Down: Combe Down Heritage Society, 2009); Bensley, *The Village Shop*; Vaughan-Lewis, M., *The Village Shop: A Short History of Itteringham Village Shop and Post Office* (Itteringham: Itteringham History, 2012).

¹⁰ Brown and Ward, *The Village Shop*; Bensley, *The Village Shop*.

has adapted to the changing circumstances of country life, often in the face of some difficulty. If this book stimulates interest in, and further research into the contribution of the shopkeeper to the life of rural England, it will have served its purpose.¹¹

Efforts to maintain rural services have played an important role in ‘sustaining residents’ vision of the “rural idyll”, an ideal that promotes a nostalgic “chocolate box” image of exemplary village facilities servicing a close-knit community’.¹² Yet again, this poses a set of fundamental questions: to what extent is our understanding of the history of the village shop and its place at the heart of the community clouded by such ideological imagery? What are the origins and evolution of this constructed image? Can it be found in contemporary accounts and literary genres, or is it purely a later construct painted with rose-tinted nostalgia? How did it influence perceptions? Did it contribute to the national self-image? Most importantly, did it provide a fair reflection of the reality as experienced by those who ran and used such shops?

The debate about what the village shop currently is and what it should be is undoubtedly influenced not only by its history but also by its popular image, yet we know remarkably little about either. As the first comprehensive study of rural retailing which utilises an interdisciplinary approach, this thesis will therefore address this issue. It explores the real and imagined socio-economic role of the shop and its keeper within village life during the nineteenth century, in terms of supplying goods and services, integrating and representing community as a place and a network of people, and projecting images of the rural into the wider national consciousness. The objective is to examine the ways in which they were portrayed in contemporary literary and visual culture, to set this within a broader cultural context and to assess how this changed over time, related to the historical reality and linked to broader conceptualisations of the rural. Collectively, the chapters establish the historic construction of the popular image, charting its evolution from the early modern period into the Edwardian era, whilst simultaneously testing its validity against evidence of the lived experience, as set within the context of the rural community. By reaching back into the nineteenth century and studying this dual aspect it is possible to demonstrate that there is a historic precedent for the rural shop to be depicted as a multifarious general retailer, that it had not always been so popular in English culture and, crucially, that the rhetoric of decline so widely espoused today began more than a century ago.

The exploration of cultural representations of people, place, space and everyday life are therefore linked to historical analysis in an innovative manner, affording insights into the fundamental question of how our image of rural society has been historically and discursively constructed. As Drotner has suggested, ‘by specifying the multiplicity of textual as well as social

¹¹ Brown and Ward, *The Village Shop*, preface.

¹² Scarpello et al., ‘A Qualitative Study’, 113.

and historical realities, we can analyse the interface between them as a dynamic process'.¹³ It is an approach which can broaden our understanding not only of the history of rural retailing but also of how changing attitudes to retailing, rural communities and the countryside were developing. It sheds light on the stereotyping of rural life and the extent to which historical and cultural understanding of the village shop and its place in the community might be influenced by its portrayal within prevalent literary and artistic genres and clouded by nostalgia and ideology. It therefore engages with the debate over the nature of rural communities and how they should be conceived and defined.

The study is driven by cultural sources therefore it is vital to highlight from the outset that this presents limitations to the scope of the research. This is not a comprehensive history of the village shop; whilst it approaches the subject from the perspective of the history of retailing and consumption, it concentrates on the role of the shop and shopkeeper within the rural community rather than their links to the wider retail network. However, as very little is currently known about the history of rural retailing, it makes a considerable contribution, a step forward. Each chapter contains elements of quantitative analysis, yet it is largely a qualitative study, focusing on the relationship between the village shopkeeper, the rural consumer and the wider community and in doing so provides a valuable insight into village life and society and the complex, intimate and often mutually beneficial relationships which existed in rural communities. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that whilst the experiences of rural service users are recreated herein, the limitations of the source material has meant that their voices remain rather muted throughout. As will become clear, this is exacerbated by the fact that the cultural image was largely created by and for urban middle-class society. However, this does not present a fundamental problem as the aim of the study is to uncover and compare the way in which the cultural image of the village shop was constructed with the way in which it emerges from historical sources. Prior to explaining the approach of the study in detail it is first necessary to establish a rationale, which is provided by our very limited understanding of the history of rural retailing or the way it was perceived or experienced by nineteenth-century society.

¹³ Drotner, K., *English Children and their Magazines 1751-1945* (New Haven: Yale University, 1988), 10.

The historiographical neglect of rural retailing

Retailing and consumption

Over the last fifty years the history of consumption and retailing has increasingly drawn the focus of social and cultural historians who have analysed a diverse range of spaces, practices and attitudes. A great deal of attention has been paid to the Victorian period, which was held by many to be the point at which modern retailing was born. This stimulated a body of work on the eighteenth century as scholars clamoured to declare it a period of extensive and far-reaching change which bore many of the characteristics that had previously been attributed to the following century.¹ Indeed, there is a general consensus that important changes in consumption patterns in the early modern period deflate any suggestions of revolutionary change thereafter.² Perhaps unsurprisingly this focus on change drew attention towards urban areas and developments in shopping practices such as advertising, trade ephemera, the use of space, the

¹ For example: Barley, L.B. and Barley, M.W., 'Lincolnshire Shopkeepers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Lincolnshire Historian*, 9, 2 (1962), pp.7-21; Willan, T.S., *The Inland Trade: Studies in English Internal Trade in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1976); Berger, R.M., 'The Development of Retail Trade in Provincial England, ca. 1550-1700', *Journal of Economic History*, 40, 1 (1980), pp.123-8; Mitchell, S.I., 'Retailing in Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Cheshire', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Cheshire and Lancashire*, 130 (1981), pp.37-60; McKendrick, N., Brewer, J., and Plumb, J.H., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-century England* (London: Europa Publications, 1982); Mitchell, S.I., 'The Development of Urban Retailing 1700-1815' in Clark, P. (ed.), *The Transformation of English Provincial Towns 1600-1800* (London: Hutchinson, 1984), pp.259-83; Mui, H.C. and Mui, L.H., *Shops and Shopkeeping in England in Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989); Shammas, C., *The Pre-Industrial Consumer in England and America* (Los Angeles: Figueroa Press, 2008); Collins, D., 'Primitive or Not? Fixed-Shop Retailing before the Industrial Revolution', *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 13, 1 (1993), pp.23-38; Fowler, C., 'Changes in Provincial Retail Practice during the Eighteenth-Century, with particular reference to Central-Southern England', *Business History*, 40, 4 (1998), pp.37-54; Alexander, N., and Akehurst, G. (eds.), *The Emergence of Modern Retailing 1750-1950* (London: Frank Cass, 1999); Cox, N., *The Complete Tradesman: A Study of Retailing 1550-1820* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Stobart, J., and Hann, A., 'Retailing Revolution in the Eighteenth Century? Evidence from North-West England', *Business History*, 46, 2 (2004), pp.171-194; Blondé et al. (eds.), *Retail Circuits and Practices in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

² Overton et al., *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London: Routledge, 2004), 7. For a useful summary of recent research on the history of consumption, which gives an indication of current areas of interest see Trentmann, F., 'Introduction', in Trentmann, F. (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Consumption* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp.1-19.

display of goods and the emergence of department stores, multiple retailing and mail order.³

Whilst the evolution of retailing and consumption and the causes and processes of change have been the cause of argument and debate, numerous other studies are marked by the pursuit of a particular perspective. For example, some traverse the market place from the consumer standpoint, exploring domestic consumption and material culture and the link between consumption and status, the idea of ‘conspicuous consumption’ having first been advanced by Thorstein Veblen at the end of the nineteenth century.⁴ Others have taken the tradesman’s perspective, exploring not only the wider economic context (e.g. the retail ‘revolution’, links to manufacturing and industrial advancement) but also various specific topics. Often utilising a more focused case-study approach, using the type of goods and/or geographic region as filters, these include, for example, distribution and supply, display, shop design, trade practice and the experience of the shopkeeper/shopworker.⁵ As neither the consumer nor the tradesmen are

³ For example: Alexander, A., ‘The Evolution of Multiple Retailing in Britain 1870-1950: A Geographical Analysis’, Doctoral thesis (University of Exeter, 1994); Corrigan, P., *The Sociology of Consumption* (London: SAGE, 1997); Church, R., ‘Advertising Consumer Goods in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Reinterpretations’, *Economic History Review*, 53, 4 (2000), pp.621-45; Lambert, J.A., *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Trade Ephemera from 1654 to the 1860s in the John Johnson Collection* (Oxford: The Bodleian Library, 2001); Benson, J. and Ugolini, L. (eds.), *A Nation of Shopkeepers: Five Centuries of British Retailing* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Morgan, V.C.E., ‘Producing Consumer Space in Eighteenth-Century England: Shops, Shopping and the Provincial Town’, Doctoral thesis (University of Coventry, 2003); Hann, A., and Stobart, J., ‘Sites of Consumption: The Display of Goods in Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Cultural and Social History*, 2, 2, (2005), pp.165-88; Morgan, V., ‘Beyond the Boundary of the Shop: Retail Advertising Spaces in Eighteenth-Century Provincial England’ in Benson, J. (ed.) and Ugolini, L. (ed.), *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society since 1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp.59-80; Walsh, C., ‘Shops, Shopping, and the Art of Decision Making’ in Styles, J., and Vickery, A., *Gender, Taste, and Material Culture in Britain and North America 1700-1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp.151-77; Stobart, J., Hann, A., and Morgan, V., *Spaces of Consumption: Leisure and Shopping in the English Town, c. 1680-1830* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007); Stobart, J., ‘Selling (through) Politeness: Advertising Provincial Shops in Eighteenth-century England’, *Cultural and Social History*, 5, 3 (2008), pp.309-28.

⁴ For example: Davis, D., *A History of Shopping* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); Nenadic, S., ‘Middle-rank Consumers and Domestic Culture in Edinburgh and Glasgow 1720-1840’, *Past and Present*, 145 (1994), pp.122-56; Weatherill, L., *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1996); Kowaleski-Wallace, E., *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping and Business in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Hussey, D. and Ponsonby, M., *Buying for the Home: Shopping for the Domestic from the Seventeenth Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); Stobart, J., *Spend, Spend, Spend! A History of Shopping* (Stroud: The History Press, 2008).

⁵ For example: Hoffman, P.C., *They Also Serve: The Story of the Shop Worker* (London: Porcupine Press, 1949); Jeffreys, J.B., *Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954); Alexander, D., *Retailing in England During the Industrial Revolution* (London: The Athlone Press, 1970); Holderness, B.A., ‘Rural Tradesmen, 1660-1850: A Regional Study in Lindsey’, *Lincolnshire History and Archaeology*, 7 (1972), pp.77-83; Blackman, J., ‘The Corner Shop: The Development of the Grocery and General Provisions Trade’ in Oddy, D. And Miller, D. (eds.), *The Making of the Modern British Diet* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), pp.148-60; Mitchell, ‘Retailing’; Winstanley, M., *The Shopkeeper’s World 1830-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University

viable without the other, the consumer providing the motivation and means to shop and the retailer providing the location, expertise and merchandise, the act of shopping is the crucial link between them. The shop itself provided the space within which they might have interacted and conducted business, although there were other modes of shopping which did not require a consumer to be physically present during a transaction (e.g. proxy or correspondence shopping and mail order). Various historians have identified and attempted to bridge the gap between the perspectives of consumer and tradesman, looking to explore the relationship between them as well as the activity of shopping itself, often making links to the wider community.⁶ Some scholars have also pursued the gender angle, drawing attention to the social status of male shopkeepers, highlighting the rise in female shopkeeping or the notable role of women in grocery and general shopkeeping.⁷

Also noteworthy is the pioneering work which has taken the historiography in an innovative new direction, various scholars having recognising the merits of analysing the cultural

Press, 1983); Crossick, G., and Haupt, H. (eds.), *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (London: Methuen, 1984); Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*; Benson and Shaw, *The Evolution of Retail Systems*; Scola, R., *Feeding the Victorian City: The Food Supply of Manchester, 1770-1870* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Walsh, C., 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London' in Benson, J. and Shaw, G. (eds.), *The Retailing Industry: Volume 1: Perspectives and the Early Modern Period* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co, 1999), pp.361-388; Fowler, 'Changes in Provincial Retail Practice'; Cox, *The Complete Tradesman*; Hann and Stobart, 'Sites of Consumption'; Horn, P., *Behind the Counter: Shop Lives from Market Stall to Supermarket* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2006); Stobart, 'Selling (through) Politeness'.

⁶ For example: Adburgham, A., *Shops and Shopping, 1800-1914: Where, and in what manner the well-dressed Englishwoman bought her clothes* (London: Barrie and Jenkins, 1989); Hosgood, C., 'The "Pigmies of Commerce" and the Working-class Community: Small Shopkeepers in England, 1870-1914', *Journal of Social History*, 22, 3 (1989), pp.439-60; Buck, A., 'Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire: Customers and Tradesmen, 1700-1800', *Textile History*, 22, 2 (1991), pp.211-37; Lawson, Z., 'Shops, Shopkeeping, and the Working-Class Community: Preston, 1860-1890', *Transactions of the Historical Society of Cheshire and Lancashire*, 141 (1991), pp.309-28; Berry, H., 'Polite Consumption: Shopping in Eighteenth-Century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), pp.375-394; Stobart, J., 'The Economic and Social Worlds of Rural Craftsmen-Retailers in Eighteenth-Century Cheshire', *The Agricultural History Review*, 52, 2 (2004), pp.141-60; Stobart et al., *Spaces of Consumption*; Stobart, 'Food Retailers'; Stobart, J., 'Gentlemen and Shopkeepers: Supplying the Country House in Eighteenth-Century England', *Economic History Review*, 64, 3 (2011), pp.885-904; Stobart, J., *Sugar and Spice: Grocers and Groceries in Provincial England, 1650-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); Mitchell, I., *Tradition and Innovation in English Retailing 1700 to 1850: Narratives of Consumption* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), particularly chapter 5.

⁷ Collins, D., 'Fixed-shop Retailing: Shrewsbury and Wolverhampton 1660-1900', Doctoral thesis (University of Wolverhampton, 2002); Haggerty, S., 'Women, Work, and the Consumer Revolution: Liverpool in the late Eighteenth Century' in Benson and Ugolini, *A Nation of Shopkeepers*, pp.106-126; Barker, H., *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England 1760-1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Barker, H., 'A Grocer's Tale: Gender, Family and Class in Early Nineteenth-Century Manchester', *Gender & History*, 21, 2 (2009), pp.340-57.

perspective.⁸ In relation to the early modern period, Cox has considered contemporary thoughts on the retail sector, deemed largely negative and hostile, and, in collaboration with Dannehl, has undertaken a comprehensive study of *Perceptions of Retailing*.⁹ They highlight how the perceptions of observers and participants, artists and writers, whether accurate or misconceived, act as a valuable source of information on individual views and experiences and wider opinions about retailing. More recently, Mitchell has favoured the use of multiple narratives, utilising these ‘stories’, which includes the perceptions and opinions of retailers, shoppers, consumers, local authorities and commentators, to demonstrate that the evolution of retailing in the period before 1850 was a more ‘fractured and fragmented’ process than has previously been suggested.¹⁰ Notably, he considers how attitudes towards retailing outlets could differ; markets, for example, were considered picturesque by some whilst for others they were an untidy nuisance, pressure to reform leading to improvements and the emergence of market halls which became a source of civic pride.¹¹ He also demonstrates that some of the more important shopkeepers in county and market towns made up the ruling elite, they were ‘pillars of the local community’.¹²

Both Aindow and Walsh have also highlighted the merits of a different perspective, using social discourse and literary culture as a means to furthering our understanding of perceptions of the shopping experience. Aindow has examined the way contemporary fiction acknowledged cultural perceptions of fashion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and expressed class anxieties.¹³ Walsh has used the social and cultural discourse on the activity of shopping in the early modern period, including both fictional and non-fictional material, to comment on a work/leisure dichotomy. She suggests that exploring many different discourses ‘has the value of highlighting the dangers of making sweeping generalisations about shopping based on single discourses, and underlines the point that discourse may not necessarily reflect practice’.¹⁴

Also utilising an interdisciplinary approach, Finn’s *The Character of Credit* examines literary representations of debt alongside the history of the debtors’ prison and debt litigation. She

⁸ A book of extracts from *The Countryman* was published in 1978 which focuses on the ways in which village trades and crafts, including the shop and post office, were portrayed in the twentieth century but apart from a short introduction by Pamela Horn, there is no useful analysis to accompany them and therefore it might serve as a useful source for a future study. Seager, E. (ed.), *The Countryman Book of Village Trades and Crafts* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1978).

⁹ Cox, *The Complete Tradesman*, particularly chapter 1; Cox, N., ‘Beggary of the Nation?: Moral, Economic and Political Attitudes to the Retail Sector in the Early Modern Period’ in Benson and Ugolini, *A Nation of Shopkeepers*, pp.26-51; Cox, N., and Dannehl, K., *Perceptions of Retailing in Early Modern England* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

¹⁰ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 9-10.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28-9, 169.

¹² *Ibid.*, chapter 2.

¹³ Aindow, R., *Dress and Identity in British Literary Culture, 1870-1914* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁴ Walsh, C., ‘Productive Shopping: The Social Discourse around Shopping in Early-Modern England, c.1660-1800’, paper given at The Economic History Society Conference (April 2004).

highlights the dichotomy which exists between studies of consumption as ‘business’ and studies of consumption as ‘culture’, a gap which she attempts to bridge by interpreting literary sources alongside the institutional history of contractual disputes. Literary and artistic works feature in the chapters as ‘dynamic, constitutive components (rather than mere reflections) of historical experience’.¹⁵ Wynne also successfully traverses the disciplinary divide with her current research on the relationship between literary texts and material culture, specifically how textiles and cloth and the retailing and trading of textiles were represented in literary culture.¹⁶

Hosgood has also pushed the boundaries in his use of sources, exploring the ‘language of daily business life’ as well as the impact of the trade press in the late Victorian and Edwardian period on shopkeepers’ *mentalité*, identifying ideological differences between principal (specialist) retailers and the domestic (general) traders.¹⁷ Amongst the former, he claims that the independent citizen shopkeeper was replaced by the trade association member who was more inclined towards collective action, thereby challenging the claims of historians such as Crossick who have depicted shopkeepers as ‘embittered’ about the threats they faced and ‘incapable and unwilling to react to external pressures’.¹⁸

Small-scale retailing and the working-class community connection

It is clear that urban and large-scale shopkeepers have attracted by far the most scrutiny. Jeffrey’s focus on the development of larger-scale urban retailing resulted in an admission that the story of small-scale retailers was ‘yet to be written’ and thirty years later McKendrick suggested that historians should pay more attention to these ‘hordes of little men’.¹⁹ According to Benson and Shaw, small fixed shops have been marginalised not only by the preoccupation of historians on ‘size, growth and success’ but also by ‘empirical difficulty’, ‘ideological assumption’ and ‘the paucity and complexity of the surviving data’.²⁰ Various studies have sought to redress the imbalance by highlighting the importance of small-scale shopkeeping in the development of

¹⁵ Finn, M.C., *The Character of Credit: Personal Debt in English Culture, 1740-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 3.

¹⁶ Wynne, D., ‘The “Despised Trade” in Textiles: H.G. Wells, William Paine, Charles Cavers and the Male Draper’s Life, 1870-1914’, [forthcoming *Textile History* 2015]; Wynne, D., ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and *Shirley*’s Queer Textiles’ in Shears, J. and Harrison, J., (eds.), *Literary Bric-a-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp.147-163. She has also looked at literary representations of women and material culture, examining women’s ownership of personal property and the novelist’s representations of female modes of possession. Wynne, D., *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010).

¹⁷ Hosgood, C., ‘The Shopkeeper’s “Friend”: the Retail Trade Press in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 25, 4 (1992), 165.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jeffrey, *Retail Trading*, xvi; McKendrick et al., *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, 5.

²⁰ Benson and Shaw, *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, 51.

retailing.²¹ Indeed, Haupt has indicated that the distinction between small and large shops as representing discord between traditional and modern, pre-capitalist and capitalist features of development has been made redundant by a range of studies and highlights the continuing predominance of small shops.²²

In highlighting the growth in general shopkeeping, Alexander has suggested that this was concentrated, by the mid nineteenth century, in the ‘class of small, general shops serving the working class’.²³ Blackman’s consideration of corner shops has also shown that it was the local general provisions store and grocer ‘which constituted the retail revolution of the nineteenth century in the food trades’.²⁴ Indeed, Shammass has argued that a number of new imported groceries, brought in during the seventeenth century, were crucial in fuelling growth in small-scale retailing.²⁵ Mitchell concurs, his study of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century retailing in Cheshire showing that ‘small, undercapitalised outlets’ were responsible for much of the growth and highlighting the particular role of small general or provision dealers.²⁶ Benson goes further, dedicating a chapter to working-class retailing habits in his ground-breaking study of ‘penny capitalists’ although very little is actually revealed about their business methods.²⁷

Nonetheless, following this lead, the relationship between small-scale retailing and the working-class community began to be developed further. In relation to the eighteenth century, Mui and Mui reiterate the neglect of what they call ‘petty’ shopkeepers, a term which includes village shops as well as small back-street shops and small general shops, thereby combining both urban and rural types. They claim that these shops, ‘at the most humble level...may well have outnumbered all other types’ and were essential to both agricultural and urban labourers as a source of supply of basic foodstuffs, yet relatively little is actually revealed about the petty shopkeeper or the wider clientele that he or she might have served.²⁸ Indeed, their analysis of the village shop is restricted to the use of the accounts of William Wood of Didsbury although this does reveal details about his business practices and customer base, the latter deemed to have been ‘drawn from the more humble village folks’.²⁹

Hosgood’s analysis of small or ‘domestic’ urban shopkeepers, the ‘pigmyies of commerce’, which concentrates on the late Victorian and Edwardian period, includes a calculation of their

²¹ For a global perspective see: Haupt, H., ‘Small Shops and Department Stores’ in Trentmann, *The Oxford Handbook*, pp.267-85.

²² Haupt, ‘Small Shops’, 267-8.

²³ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 98-99.

²⁴ Blackman, ‘The Corner Shop’, 154. See also Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 103.

²⁵ Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 307-10.

²⁶ Mitchell, ‘Retailing’, 56.

²⁷ Benson, J., *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1983).

²⁸ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, particularly chapters 6 and 7.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 212.

survival rate and he identifies a close connection with the communities they served, suggesting that whilst they ‘rejected institutional life’ (unlike the large or ‘principal’ retailers), and therefore ‘occupied an ambiguous position’ in the community, they also recognised their dependence on the custom of those living in the area in which they traded and therefore were ‘well-integrated into the working-class neighbourhood’.³⁰ In doing so he usefully points out that in order to assess the social significance of small shopkeepers it is imperative to consider both the economic and the cultural relationships which existed between shopkeepers and members of their community.³¹ Taking a case-study approach, Lawson has built on Hosgood’s work, identifying a need to understand who the small urban working-class shopkeeper actually was and concluding that they were of a ‘transitory nature’ with location and dual-occupation being important factors in their survival rate; it is the shops rather than the shopkeepers which appear to have had resilience and longevity.³²

Also contributing to this growing body of knowledge are those who have filtered the subject through the lens of the credit system. Alexander has asserted that ‘small shopkeepers were pressed by the working classes for credit facilities’ which exposed them to some risk but that by extending credit to the poorer members of society, tradesmen provided a ‘valuable, if imperfect, social service’.³³ Kent has considered the subject in more detail, using the records of the Insolvent Debtors Courts in the early nineteenth century to analyse the credit dealings of small businessmen, who, he claims, ‘always formed the majority of insolvent debtors’.³⁴ He also highlights the problems associated with the routine obligation to extend credit to customers and their role as moneylenders, the constant struggle to control book debt exacerbated by the fact that many were ‘indifferent book-keepers’.³⁵ By demonstrating that ‘credit and insecurity went hand in hand’, he reiterates the precarious nature of small-scale retailing.³⁶

Rural retailing and consumption

Far less attention has been paid to the rural picture, although there is a basis of understanding from which to conduct this research.³⁷ Cox and Dannehl have dedicated a chapter of their book on *Perceptions of Retailing* to visual and literary representations of retailing in the early modern period

³⁰ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 447, 453.

³¹ Ibid., 439.

³² Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’, 326.

³³ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 184.

³⁴ Kent, D.A, ‘Small Businessmen and their Credit Transactions in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Business History*, 36, 2 (1994), 50.

³⁵ Ibid., 51-2, 60.

³⁶ Ibid., 61.

³⁷ It should be noted that a doctoral thesis on Welsh village shops was completed but despite exhaustive efforts it could not be obtained and therefore could not be reviewed as part of this

which specifically identifies the political and social anxieties about rural shops which led to them being ‘virtually expunged from the literary and visual record, only to re-emerge in the nineteenth century when times and circumstances had changed’.³⁸ Unlike the market, the fair and the itinerant, which were generally considered ‘acceptable both to the establishment and to the “picturesque eye”’, the rural shop, they suggest, was deemed ‘unproductive’, ‘unromantic’ and ‘subversive’.³⁹

Yet, whilst the rural shopkeeper may not have been a *familiar* figure until the industrial era, there is plenty of evidence to demonstrate the existence of retailing in villages during the pre-industrial era. Davis’ claim nearly fifty years ago that the nineteenth-century shop was ‘a marked advance on the dreary, amateurish shops of a century before’ has been revised, Hussey and Ponsonby, for example, arguing that even in the eighteenth century, the small shop ‘was far from being a “dark and unappealing” antediluvian space’, drawing attention to the succession of scholarly work which ‘has reinterpreted the pejoratively viewed “small shop”’.⁴⁰

Scholars such as Weatherill and de Vries have demonstrated that growth in rural demand during the early modern period was linked with a growing ability and inclination to spend on an expanding range of essential and non-essential goods, rural consumption increasingly informed by urban tastes and priorities.⁴¹ However, the traditional view that market towns had shops, while country people bought from pedlars, a distinct rural-urban dichotomy in perceptions of retail provision, has gradually been superseded by a wealth of evidence that indicates, as Cox and Dannehl have argued, that ‘provincial and metropolitan spheres cannot be divided’, villages being better served by shops by the end of the eighteenth century than had previously been supposed.⁴² Various case studies have evidenced that village shops were well established by the mid-eighteenth century, their numbers having grown and distribution widening during the early modern period.⁴³ In this regard it certainly seems, as Stobart has indicated, that ‘the notion of rural and urban as separate spheres seems untenable’.⁴⁴

research: Joseph, M.E., ‘The Village Shop in Rural Mid-Wales’, Doctoral thesis (Saint David’s University, 1977).

³⁸ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 42-5.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-7.

⁴⁰ Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 266; Hussey and Ponsonby, *Buying for the Home*, 4.

⁴¹ Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*; De Vries, J., *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁴² Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 186. For a useful summary of the rural-urban debate see: Van Damme, I., ‘The Lure of the New: Urban Retailing in the Surroundings of Antwerp (late Seventeenth-early Eighteenth Centuries)’ in Blonde et al., *Fashioning Old and New: Changing Consumer Patterns in Western Europe (1650-1900)* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), pp.97-120; Margairaz, D., ‘City and Country: Home, Possessions, and Diet, Western Europe 1600-1800’ in Trentmann, *The Oxford Handbook*, pp.192-210.

⁴³ For example see: Barley and Barley, ‘Lincolnshire Shopkeepers’; Patten, J., ‘Village and Town: An Occupational Study’, *The Agricultural History Review*, 20, 1 (1972), pp.1-16; Holderness, ‘Rural

Evidence of profound changes in the nineteenth century has led many to suggest that rural retailing underwent something of a transformation during the century, particularly in the Victorian period, paralleling the well-documented wider evolution in retailing. Crompton, for example, has claimed that growing demand for rural services, resulting from increased agricultural output in the early part of the century, led to a rise in the numbers of tradesmen and craftsmen.⁴⁵ More specifically, Chartres has suggested that, whilst the origin of village shops was ‘well before 1800’, the ‘real dissemination’ of rural tradesmen was ‘a feature of the Victorian countryside’, noting in particular a ‘remarkable growth’ in general shopkeeping, which ‘above all was the symbol of change in the retail trade, the aspect of the ‘revolution’ most striking in the rural districts’.⁴⁶ This is reiterated by Stobart who has indicated that it was the small general shop or provision dealer which was the type growing most rapidly in number.⁴⁷ Moreover, Toplis has found that clothing could be bought in shops ‘scattered across the countryside’ and not just in larger villages and urban areas, suggesting greater provision in lesser settlements than had previously been supposed.⁴⁸ Winstanley, who describes the village shop as ‘a department store in miniature’, attributes much of the change to the expansion of railways and the national postal service whilst cautioning that such ‘favourable developments, however, did not mean that village shops necessarily prospered or that they were local monopolies’.⁴⁹ Indeed, Horn, has drawn attention to the fact that rural retail provision continued to be patchy even towards the end of the century.⁵⁰

It has also been shown that rural shops often stocked a remarkably wide range of goods, even in very small settlements, such evidence suggesting that many were akin to general stores.⁵¹

Tradesmen’; Willan, *The Inland Trade*, 76-106; Mitchell, I., ‘Pitt’s Shop Tax in the History of Retailing’, *The Local Historian*, 14, 6 (1981), pp.348-351; Martin, J.M., ‘Village Traders and the Emergence of a Proletariat in South Warwickshire, 1750-1851’, *The Agricultural History Review*, 32, 2 (1984), pp.179-188; Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 148-59; Shammass, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 272-318; Cox, N., ‘The Distribution of Retailing Tradesmen in North Shropshire, 1660-1750’, *Journal of Regional and Local Studies*, 13, 1 (1993), pp.4-22; Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’; Stobart, J., ‘The Village Shop, 1660-1760: Innovation and Tradition’, conference paper given at The University of Leicester (September 2014).

⁴⁴ Stobart, ‘The Village Shop’.

⁴⁵ Crompton, C.A., ‘Changes in Rural Service Occupations During the Nineteenth Century: An Evaluation of Two Sources for Hertfordshire, England’, *Rural History*, 6, 2 (1995), 193.

⁴⁶ Chartres, J.A., ‘Country Tradesmen’ in Mingay, G.E. (ed.), *The Victorian Countryside: Volume 1* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981), 300, 303.

⁴⁷ Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 103. See also: Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 266.

⁴⁸ Toplis, A.E.M., ‘The Non-Elite Consumer and ‘Wearing Apparel’ in Herefordshire and Worcestershire, 1800-1850’, Doctoral thesis (University of Wolverhampton, 2008), 242.

⁴⁹ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 202.

⁵⁰ Horn, P., ‘Over the Counter: The Rise and Fall of the Village Shop’ in Seager, *The Countryman Book*, 14.

⁵¹ For example see: Barley and Barley, ‘Lincolnshire Shopkeepers’; Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 266-8; Holderness, ‘Rural Tradesmen’; Berger, ‘The Development of Retail Trade’; Winstanley,

Indeed, perhaps the most common observation made in the historiography of retailing in relation to village shopkeeping is concerned with the 'general' nature of the trade. Jeffreys has observed that there was a tradition for general shopkeeping as 'at no time had every retailer stuck to his last', citing the village general dealer as example.⁵² Morgan has suggested that in the early eighteenth century, 'outside large centres, shopkeepers could not confine themselves to one trade'.⁵³ Holderness has also used White's directory of 1842 to show that general retailers were the most common type of rural tradesmen in Lindsey (northern Lincolnshire).⁵⁴

However, as Lawson has cautioned, general shopkeeping was often used as an umbrella term to cover trades such as provision dealer and grocer and therefore might disguise the primary trade of a shopkeeper or their propensity for a particular type of stock.⁵⁵ It is certainly likely that the core skills and trade of a producer-retailer or craftsmen-retailer remained of primary importance and there were undoubtedly some specialist rural retailers, particularly in larger settlements. Stobart, for example, has suggested that in the later eighteenth century specialism was beginning to be more obvious in villages whilst Holderness has shown that by the 1840s there was some increase in specialism, at least in Lincolnshire.⁵⁶ Conversely the true extent of business practices and any diversity or involvement in general retailing, which sidelines or a wide range of stock suggest, might be hidden behind a principal or specialist trade as recorded in official records such as trade directories and census returns. A baker, for example, might also have had a sideline in groceries. The problematic nature of trade classification is emphasised further by the fact that a general retailer might have chosen to define themselves according to one of their lines of stock (e.g. grocer) to avoid being labelled a 'shopkeeper', which has been suggested to have indicated a low status.⁵⁷ At times the retailer would have had no influence over how they were defined therefore such labels might also be considered a perception or constructed representation.

Dual occupation has also been shown to have remained an important part of the nature of rural as well as urban retailing.⁵⁸ Not only was a core primary trade or craft often supplemented with another or some involvement in service provision but there is also plenty of evidence to

The Shopkeeper's World, chapter 13; Shammas, *The Pre-Industrial Consumer*, 272-318; Cox, 'The Distribution of Retailing Tradesmen', 13-14; Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 58; Stobart, 'The Village Shop'.

⁵² Jeffreys, *Retail Trading*, 52.

⁵³ Morgan, 'Producing Consumer Space', 25.

⁵⁴ Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen', 78.

⁵⁵ Lawson, 'Shops, Shopkeeping', 311.

⁵⁶ Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 77; Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen'.

⁵⁷ For further information on the term 'shopkeeper', including its problematic nature, see: Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 169; Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 12; Phillips, M., 'The Evolution of Markets and Shops in Britain' in Benson and Shaw, *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, 63.

⁵⁸ For example see: Toplis, 'The Non-Elite Consumer', 59.

demonstrate that it could also be complemented by landownership or some involvement in agriculture. Holderness' findings suggest that not only were most rural tradesmen agriculturists but there was persistence in an essentially close relationship between trades.⁵⁹ Stobart, in a study of Cheshire food retailers, points out the link between rural retailers and the land, identifying an engagement with animal husbandry and farming which blurs the distinction between retailer and producer.⁶⁰

There seems little doubt that by the Victorian period village shops were unique enterprises, each fostering individual characteristics forged by their particular location, the degree of competition, the community they served, the types of trade, services and stock on sale and the character of the shopkeeper. This is recognised by Winstanley who suggests that the rural setting was the only characteristic common to them all, their unique nature linking closely to the shopkeeper's individuality, character and attitude; they ranged from 'the pathetic display of goods in a front-room window to the thriving business not unlike a primitive department store, appealing to a broad spectrum of local society, offering personal attention and an impressive selection of goods'.⁶¹

With that in mind, it is important to note that there are those who emphasise the importance of considering evidence of continuity alongside that of change. As Cox and Dannehl have declared, 'whatever changes may be discerned in the mechanics of retailing, they need to be seen alongside, as well as in opposition to, the long and profound continuities'.⁶² There is an implication that traditional modes of shopping and retailing persisted in both urban and rural areas, Alexander suggesting that 'in large areas of the country there was little pressure to change traditional shop practices' and the pace of change was 'leisurely'.⁶³ Indeed, substantial research undertaken by Collins on the structure and organisation of fixed-shop retailing has reiterated this point, demonstrating that beneath the highly visible and dramatic changes which occurred within retailing during the nineteenth century and which have drawn considerable academic scrutiny, change was 'incremental' and a tradition of small-scale, owner or family run shops persisted.⁶⁴ Yet, as Collins observes, 'there are more publications devoted to understanding and explaining the impact of large-scale organisation than the continuity and persistence of small-scale enterprise'.⁶⁵ More recently, Mitchell has provided a timely reminder that the processes of buying and selling should be set within the context of tradition as well as innovation, that 'old and new existed side by side, not just in the same town or same street, but even in the same retail

⁵⁹ Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen', 81-82.

⁶⁰ Stobart, 'Food Retailers'.

⁶¹ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 200.

⁶² Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 185.

⁶³ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 236-7.

⁶⁴ Collins, 'Fixed-shop Retailing', ii.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

establishment'.⁶⁶ Therefore, whilst suggesting that small shopkeepers were 'slow to change', he also acknowledges that aspects of traditional retailing such as markets, hawkers and rural shopkeepers, so often discussed in terms of their perpetual decline, were capable of adaption and modernisation, albeit with varying degrees of success.⁶⁷

Potential variations in the degree of innovation and the persistence of tradition notwithstanding, overall it seems apparent that village shops were increasingly important in the chain of distribution, playing a key role in making a world of goods available to rural consumers. By the early nineteenth century rural society had begun to depend upon retail supplies, the merchant encroaching on the producer and altering the nature of local trade.⁶⁸ Indeed, retailers like grocers and mercers had the knowledge and skills to handle and process a multitude of goods, bringing 'urban products and fashions into the countryside'.⁶⁹ This link to urban markets has allowed a clear distinction to be made between the retailing village shopkeeper and the more parochially-focused village craftsmen and tradesmen, the retailer better positioned to be able to respond to wider changes in retailing and consumption.

This seems particularly apparent in relation to the non-elite consumer. Discussing the supply of foodstuffs to the rural poor in the eighteenth century, Mui and Mui state that 'contemporary observers leave little doubt that for the labouring poor in the villages in southern England the petty shop was largely replacing the open market as a major source of supply for their meagre diet', directly challenging the 'persistent myth' that local markets remained the major source of food supplies for agricultural and urban labourers into the nineteenth century.⁷⁰ The importance of the village shop in providing basic necessities to the non-elite consumer such as agricultural labourers, servants and the parish poor (who might be provided with basic necessities via parish overseers who often made purchases locally), has been widely posited, often in terms of an increased dependency on rural retailers and shopping following wider changes within the agricultural community, such as the effects of Enclosure on the degree of self-sufficiency.⁷¹ Such change undoubtedly turned many to waged labour on the land during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century which increased their reliance on the open market. However, the rural consumer and their purchasing habits is a subject identified as in need of further analysis. Toplis urges attention on the 'routine consumption patterns of ordinary consumers' whilst, more specifically, Stobart suggests that the country consumer of agricultural produce has been

⁶⁶ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 1.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁶⁸ Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen', 82.

⁶⁹ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 35.

⁷⁰ However, their suggestion of a north-south divide is misleading as villages in the north certainly also had shops by the end of the eighteenth century. Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 152, 157.

⁷¹ For example: Holderness, 'Rural Tradesmen'; Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 212; Horn, *Behind the Counter*, 51; Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 26; De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 10, 169.

neglected as ‘focus often falls on the broader marketing of agricultural produce or feeding urban populations, rather than the supply of rural consumers’.⁷² Thus far much of the progress made relates to the purchase of clothing; however, there has been some attention paid to the social significance of the early modern village shop, evidence of regular trips indicating that customers may have ‘enjoyed them’.⁷³

Highlighting the increasing importance of rural retailers in the consumption habits of the rural working class does not mean to suggest that markets, fairs, itinerant salesmen and second-hand dealing were inconsequential in rural trade during the eighteenth century as their role in the chain of distribution has been well recognised.⁷⁴ Indeed, hawkers and peddlers were a familiar sight in rural communities well into the nineteenth century, Davidoff & Hall claiming that ‘itinerant pedlars continued to be important sources of goods as well as news’.⁷⁵ This is supported by Styles as well as Toplis in relation to the supply and distribution of clothing and fabric, the latter arguing that itinerant selling remained ‘essential’ in the first half of the nineteenth century, particularly to less mobile members of rural society.⁷⁶ Furthermore, many still visited urban markets so it is important to acknowledge that by the Victorian era village shops were continuing to serve rural communities *alongside* itinerant salesmen and local markets, which continued to play important roles in the dissemination of goods in rural communities.

There has also been some useful analysis conducted on the purchasing habits of the middling ranks of consumers within rural society, such as the clergy, professionals and farmers. By scrutinising the customer base of Robert Mansfield, a village tailor, Fowler has identified variations in the type of customer which might frequent a village tradesman, suggesting that

⁷² Toplis, ‘The Non-Elite Consumer’, i; Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’, 23.

⁷³ Examples focusing on clothing: Buck, ‘Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire’; Fowler, C., ‘Robert Mansbridge, A Rural Tailor and his Customers 1811-1815’, *Textile History*, 28, 1 (1997), pp.29-38; Toplis, ‘The Non-Elite Consumer’. For examples which highlight the social significance of the shop see: Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 44; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 202-6, 267, 272.

⁷⁴ For example: Alexander, *Retailing in England*, chapters 2 and 3; Spufford, M., *The Great Re-Clothing of Rural England: Petty Chapmen and their Wares in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Hambledon Press, 1984); Lemire, B., ‘Consumerism in Pre-Industrial and Early Industrial England: the Trade in Secondhand Clothes’, *Journal of British Studies*, 27 (1988), pp. 1-24; Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 73-105; Naggar, B., *Jewish Pedlars and Hawkers 1740-1940* (Camberley: Porphyrogenitus, 1992); Phillips, ‘The Evolution of Markets and Shops’; Fontaine, L., *History of Pedlars in Europe* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Brown, D., ‘Persons of Infamous Character or an Honest Industrious and Useful Description of People? The Textile Pedlars of Alstonfield and the Role of Peddling in Industrialisation’, *Textile History*, 31 (2000), pp. 1-26; Horn, *Behind the Counter*, chapter 1; Toplis, ‘The Non-Elite Consumer’; Stobart, J. and Van Damme, I. (eds.), *Modernity and the Second-Hand Trade: European Consumption Cultures and Practices, 1700-1900* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*.

⁷⁵ Davidoff, L., and Hall, C., *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class 1780-1850* (London: Routledge, 1987), 241.

⁷⁶ Styles, J., ‘Clothing the North: the Supply of Non-elite Clothing in the Eighteenth-Century North of England’, *Textile History*, 2 (1994), pp.139-166; Toplis, ‘The Non-Elite Consumer’, 242.

whilst his customers were 'his friends and neighbours from the surrounding area', there was no 'preponderance of one occupation or social level in the client list'.⁷⁷ He was serving the lower *and* middle orders and whilst most customers came from the village, the overall catchment area is shown to have been over sixty square miles, including a nearby town, thus demonstrating that village traders might have influence outside their immediate communities.⁷⁸ In a similar analysis, Buck has analysed the customer base of a 'general shop' in Westoning, which also shows the servicing of the middling orders and that custom was coming from outside the parish.⁷⁹ Moreover, Stobart's assessment of the customer network of Ralph Williams, a village butcher in Wybunbury, establishes the likelihood of a 'core of established customers', the relatively high price of meat indicating that they were above the lower ranks of society although problems in tracing various customers precluded further analysis of their class and status.⁸⁰

The rural gentry, including what are variously referred to as the lesser, petty or minor gentry, have also received some limited attention. Extensive analysis of probate inventories has identified their relative engagement in the adoption of new material goods during the early modern period whilst analyses of their shopping habits, particularly in relation to the consumption of clothing, has demonstrated that they used a wide range of suppliers, both urban and rural, as part of a complex and thoughtful purchasing process and were of crucial importance to their local economy.⁸¹ Much less is known about their routine consumption of everyday goods, particularly perishables such as food and drink, or the role of local retailers in supplying such commodities. Vickery's pioneering study of the Georgian lesser gentry in Lancashire has provided a useful insight into the daily lives of the women in charge of such households, yet their role in the domestic economy focuses on the production and processing of goods rather than what needed to be purchased and where it was purchased from.⁸² However, a recent case study looking at the domestic consumption habits of a rural lesser gentry family in early nineteenth-century Bedfordshire has established the role of village shops in supplying the country house.⁸³ Significantly, it has revealed the degree of mutual dependency between village shopkeeper and

⁷⁷ Fowler, 'Robert Mansbridge', 30.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Buck, 'Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire', 229-33.

⁸⁰ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 31.

⁸¹ For example: Buck, 'Buying Clothes in Bedfordshire'; Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, chapter 8; Bailey, L.A., 'Maintaining Status: Consumption in the Nineteenth-Century Gentry Household: The Gibbard family of Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire', MA thesis (University of Northampton, 2010); Bailey, L.A., 'Consumption and Status: Shopping for Clothes in a Nineteenth-Century Bedfordshire Gentry Household', *Midland History*, 36, 1 (2011), pp.89-114; Bailey, L.A., 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food: The Reciprocal Relationship Between the Country House and the Village Shop in the Late Georgian period', *History of Retailing and Consumption*, 1, 1 (2015).

⁸² Vickery, A., *The Gentleman's Daughter: Women's Lives in Georgian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1998), chapter 4.

⁸³ Bailey, 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food'.

country squire and the integrated nature of their relationship. This correlates with Winstanley's claim that 'the gentry and clergy sometimes felt a social obligation to patronise local shops'.⁸⁴ Higher up the fiscal scale there is only limited coverage of the consumption habits of the rural consumer as analysis of the spending habits of the rural elite have predominantly been approached in terms of the material culture of the country house and there is a distinct bias towards their links to luxury goods and urban suppliers.⁸⁵ Moreover, as such studies often make use of probate inventories, they have made more of the ownership of goods than of the acquisition process.

Rural life and community

Rural communities have historically been viewed as synonymous with agricultural processes and a dependence upon the land. This general tendency to filter rural life through the perspective of agricultural interest and to treat agricultural communities as units of production rather than consumption has obscured the role of retailers within such communities. Knowledge of the extent to which rural households utilised local suppliers, particularly retailers, is therefore limited. Research which has dealt with change in rural communities, often refers only fleetingly to rural traders, frequently in combination with craftsmen, in wider discussions on the diversity of the rural market place or in general commentary on broader social issues.⁸⁶ There are various studies which look at the supply of food to urban populations yet little has been said about how rural communities fed themselves beyond the notion of self-sufficiency.⁸⁷

There has been some recognition of the social and cultural significance of the presence of retailers within their rural communities, Winstanley claiming that 'unlike urban tradesmen who were able to form their own separate social circles, the village shopkeeper was condemned to virtual social isolation despite appearing to be the most gregarious member of the community, mixing freely with all classes in the course of his business'.⁸⁸ This has been superseded by a number of studies which suggest that this may not have been the case. Hosgood,

⁸⁴ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 204.

⁸⁵ For example: Stobart, 'Gentlemen and Shopkeepers'; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, chapter 9; Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, chapter 5.

⁸⁶ For example: Mingay, G.E., *Rural Life in Victorian England* (London: William Heinemann, 1977); Horn, P., *The Rural World 1780-1850: Social Change in the English Countryside* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1980); Ward, S. et al., *Seasons of Change: Rural Life in Victorian England* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982); Horn, P., *The Changing Countryside in Victorian and Edwardian England and Wales* (London: The Athlone Press, 1984); Horn, P., *Life and Labour in Rural England 1760-1850* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987); Philip, N., *Victorian Village Life* (Idbury: Albion, 1993); Mingay, G.E., *Land and Society in England 1750-1980* (Harlow: Longman, 1994).

⁸⁷ For example: Blackman, J., 'The Food Supply of an Industrial Town: A Study of Sheffield's Public Markets 1790-1900', *Business History*, 5, 2 (1963), pp.83-97; Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City*.

⁸⁸ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 213.

for example, has argued that small shopkeepers were ‘dynamically involved in the culture of the community’, although he tends to focus on their relationship with the working class and mixes urban and rural retailers together within the definition of ‘small shopkeeper’.⁸⁹ As already suggested, Lawson has also sought to understand who the working-class shopkeeper was but again focuses on the urban perspective.⁹⁰ Stobart is one of the most active historians in this area, having provided two studies which concentrate on the rural rather than the urban perspective. Both focus on Cheshire in the eighteenth century, the first emphasising the ‘firmly rural’ nature of the social and economic lives of rural craftsmen-retailers, specifically tailors and shoemakers, painting a picture of ‘family-centred local socio-economic systems’, and describing them as ‘bastions of the rural community’.⁹¹ He cites the predominantly geographically-confined economic existence of such traders, the prevalence of dual-occupation and the importance of their links to agriculture. The second case study looks at rural butchers, making a distinction between their ‘firmly rural’ lives and lifestyles and that of rural grocers who are suggested to be ‘linked more closely to urban markets and tastes’.⁹²

The village itself, as well as rural life and society more generally, has received some attention from scholars who have married cultural sources and social history together or looked in detail at the cultural perspective in order to develop our understanding of the English village and its people and the ways in which they were perceived and defined, as well as to comment on major developments and social change in rural life and community and to expose the idyllic rhetoric which has evolved in relation to the countryside. Marsh, in an analysis of the ‘pastoral movement’ or ‘back-to-the-land movement’ of the late Victorian period, has provided an insight into the idealistic perceptions of rural life which emerged and evolved during that time. Indeed, the cultural response to rapid industrialisation during the nineteenth century, particularly the development of opposing views on urban and rural life, became the subject of attention, dealt with in detail by Williams in his seminal work, *The Country and the City*.⁹³

Since then various scholars have reflected on the ideological significance of the countryside. Newby has drawn attention to the fact that the popular image of English rural life is often distorted by nostalgia, hiding a ‘less than idyllic reality’, and specifically set out to dismiss the prevailing cultural myths.⁹⁴ A collection of essays on *The Rural Idyll* has recounted changing

⁸⁹ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’.

⁹⁰ Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’.

⁹¹ Stobart, ‘The Economic and Social Worlds’, 157, 160. He also reiterates the neglect of the social history of villages shops in Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 16.

⁹² Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’, 29.

⁹³ Marsh, J., *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in Victorian England from 1880 to 1914* (London: Quartet Books, 1982); Williams, R., *The Country and the City* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1985).

⁹⁴ Newby, H., *Country Life: A Social History of Rural England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987), 3, 92.

perceptions of the countryside over time, providing clarity on the issues and forces that have influenced past and present views of the ideal countryside.⁹⁵ An Anglo-American study has also considered the historical processes and ideas behind the continuing attachment to the countryside, it having been raised to an idealised status, part of an inherently protectionist view of the countryside. Bunce emphasises how this ‘countryside ideal’, stretching back over three centuries, has been ‘gradually woven into the very fabric’ of Anglo-American culture, urbanisation having established the ideal conditions for nurturing the countryside ideal. Notably, he identifies the literate and culture-conscious middle class as a social and economic force within which ‘the seeds of reaction to urbanisation and the concomitant sentiment for the countryside were sown’, coining the phrase ‘the armchair countryside’ to describe how they were attracted as much to the comfortable imagery of books and paintings as to direct experience of the countryside itself.⁹⁶ Crucially he urges us not to dismiss the countryside ideal as ‘the trivial nostalgia of urbanites’, arguing that ‘its complexity and durability demand that it be recognised as a significant influence in the shaping of our cultural landscapes and our environmental values’.⁹⁷

Short has declared the countryside to be ‘a place of broader cultural significance and deeper ideological meaning, a place redolent with historical association, perceptions of nationality and intimations of community’.⁹⁸ His analysis of the ideas (myths, ideologies and texts) behind the concepts of wilderness, countryside and city, draws on an interpretation of the environment by William Kirk: the *phenomenal environment*, the one of empirical facts, and the *behavioural environment*, the one as perceived, the idea being that personal experience ensures that each of us have our own unique version of the latter.⁹⁹ He also acknowledges the influence of Williams whose critical analysis of literature was sensitive to the social relations embodied in cultural expression.¹⁰⁰ Usefully, in relation to his analysis of environmental ‘myths’, he points out that there is a difference between experiencing the countryside and rendering it for consumption as ‘once it is codified in language, there is a distancing from the experience’.¹⁰¹ This is reminder that the cultural perspective might differ considerably from the lived experience; indeed, he states that ‘there may be an anti-urban bias in English culture but the bias is itself biased against the rural community in its totality...[there is a] sense of a missing element, that of the working country

⁹⁵ Mingay, G.E. (ed.), *The Rural Idyll* (London: Routledge, 1989).

⁹⁶ Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, 12, 37, 206.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹⁸ Short, J.R., *Imagined Country: Society, Culture and Environment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1991), 77.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, xv.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 35-6.

person'.¹⁰² This is also reflected on by Reay who demonstrates how rural workers were absent from or caricatured and romanticised in much of the literary and artistic canon.¹⁰³ Therefore, if considered within a broader context, the study of popular cultural imagery is inherently valuable; for example, Short considers the environmental ideologies and myths embodied in 'texts' such as novels, films and paintings, acknowledging that they are produced for specific audiences and yet provide invaluable information on ideas about the physical environment.¹⁰⁴ In the same way such 'texts' can enhance our understanding of contemporary perceptions of rural life and community and the way in which people reacted to change. As Laing reasons, 'no account of rural change can be complete without an understanding of the ideas, hopes and beliefs informing the actions of those supporting (or, indeed, opposing) such changes'.¹⁰⁵

Following in the same vein, Burchardt has drawn attention to 'another countryside', a 'second version', which 'consists of everything that people have thought or felt about rural England'.¹⁰⁶ He usefully demonstrates that the countryside is an object of consumption and not just production, revealing how attitudes towards it have developed over the last two hundred years and influenced social change, having 'acquired a powerful resonance within English culture and society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, largely as a result of industrialisation and urbanisation'.¹⁰⁷ A key point to draw from this historiography is the sense that literary and artistic expressions of the countryside were overwhelmingly devoid of the sentiment and influence of the rural working-class, including those in trades which were not associated with a traditional agrarian past.

Linking representation and reality

Evidence of an increase in the numbers and distribution of rural shops has shown that a world of goods was readily available to rural consumers. However, surprisingly little is known about the long-term development of rural services, which are often ignored as marginal and un-dynamic. It is certainly clear that within the growing corpus of research on retailing and consumption, relatively little attention has been paid to the village shop as a bias towards the urban experience

¹⁰² Short, B., 'Images and Realities in the English Rural Community: An Introduction' in Short, B. (ed.), *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 4.

¹⁰³ Reay, B., *Rural Englands: Labouring Lives in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), chapter 8.

¹⁰⁴ Short, *Imagined Country*, xvii.

¹⁰⁵ Laing, S., 'Images of the Rural in Popular Culture 1750-1900' in Short, *The English Rural Community*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ Burchardt, J., *Paradise Lost: Rural Idyll and Social Change Since 1800* (London and New York: I.B.Tauris, 2002), 2.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

has left the rural perspective rather neglected. Village shops have largely been ignored by retail historians, either in favour of more richly evidenced urban counterparts or the relevance lost within wider studies of retailing and shopkeeping which touch upon, skirt around or pay lip service to them. Indeed, many deliberately highlight their importance and either lament the lack of evidence or urge further research before moving on. Therefore, whilst provincial England and the small urban shopkeeper have been relatively well served, the rural equivalent remains a relative mystery, despite being acknowledged as part of the group of 'petty' shopkeepers who are widely considered to have been crucial in the development of retail trade. The problem has been recognised by Cox who specifically acknowledges the lack of studies relating to 'rural settlements' and pointing out that 'a tacit assumption has emerged that in these places the fixed shop devoted specifically to retailing played a peripheral role'.¹⁰⁸ Stobart has also highlighted the need for further research, citing the particular neglect of food dealers as justification for his study of Cheshire village butchers in the long eighteenth century.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Mitchell has questioned whether it is fair to regard rural shops as on the margins of retailing as whilst many were rather modest, others were more substantial.¹¹⁰ We certainly need to know more about the character and practices of the village shop and its keeper as a better understanding of rural points of supply will provide clarity on Weatherill's emphasis of the way in which access to goods determined consumption practices.

There has also been a failure to write the village shop into the history of rural life and community. The notion of rural self-sufficiency disguises the role of the village shopkeeper in the provision of necessities, particularly perishable goods like food and drink, the purchase of which is too often presumed and rarely expanded upon or quantified. So, despite the village shop providing a unique perspective, being poised between the urban and the rural, it remains relatively unexplored as a retailing entity in its own right. Its history can provide an insight into the way in which shopping and consumption evolved in rural areas as well as the social and economic evolution of the rural communities themselves. There is a basis of understanding, it having been identified that rural retailing was marked by diversification, flexible trading practices, dual-occupation, a degree of integration into the rural community and an apparent disparity between official records and the true extent of general shopkeeping, all of which provides the basis for further analysis, but the limitations of the research done thus far indicates that much more is needed. For instance, the inclusion of village shops in some studies seems rudimentary as the main aims of the text preclude a more intimate study; some mix the urban and rural perspective; most tend not to cover the second half of the nineteenth century and/or do not

¹⁰⁸ Cox, 'The Distribution of Retailing Tradesmen', 4.

¹⁰⁹ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 23.

¹¹⁰ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 78.

explicitly focus on village retailing, the craftsmen-retailers and producer-retailers receiving more specific attention. More work is also needed on the wider social and cultural significance of the presence of retailers within their communities to build on existing knowledge. Part of the problem is the scarce survival of sufficient evidence, a fact widely recognised in relation to small shopkeepers.¹¹¹ When taken in a rural context this problem appears more acute, Fowler declaring that ‘small retailers in less fashionable areas or out in the countryside have, for the most part, been lost to us’.¹¹²

The following study draws the village shop into the spotlight, proving that their business records, whilst not as widespread or perhaps as well-preserved as many relating to urban shopkeepers, are nonetheless detailed enough to provide the basis for useful analysis. Rich literary material such as biographies, autobiographies and memoirs help to bring the village shopkeeper to life, who is not analysed in isolation but within a socio-economic context. This research therefore falls within a body of work which has sought to explore the relationship between consumer and tradesman and make links to the wider community. It combines multiple perspectives: firstly, the village shopkeeper, not only in the role of retailer but as a member of the community; secondly, the rural consumer, of whom we actually know very little; and thirdly, the village community, in terms of a collective need, both social and commercial. It therefore avoids the tendency to speak of rural shopping and consumption in terms of the rural consumer’s access to urban markets and retailers, instead seeking to ascertain the significance of the role of retailing within the rural community, not just in terms of facilitating access to an expanding world of goods but in relation to the degree of integration of the shopkeeper into rural life and society. Yet it does not aim to overplay the role of the village shop in the supply of rural communities, merely to draw attention to its relative importance, both real and imagined.

It is also clear that cultural representations of the village shop and shopkeeper have yet to receive specific and comprehensive scrutiny. Identifying similarities or disparities between the cultural imagery and the lived experience is therefore of primary importance in this thesis. Historians often utilise literary and visual sources in order to enhance or illustrate their analysis yet the richness of the material can be overlooked if consideration is not given to the provenance and cultural significance of each piece and the motivations and meanings which might lie behind such constructed images. The following study follows a growing number of scholars who have uncovered a wealth of information on attitudes, anxieties, ideas and morality within society by analysing cultural material in a more sophisticated manner. Muldrew is one such example, his comprehensive study of the cultural meaning

¹¹¹ For example: Mui and Mui claim that ‘shop records of petty chandlers are very sparse, if not nonexistent’ and therefore use excise accounts of licensed tea dealers as ‘objective evidence of their presence’; Lawson also suggests that a shortage of source materials partly accounts for their neglect. Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 148; Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’, 311.

¹¹² Fowler, ‘Changes in Provincial Retail Practice’, 46-47.

of credit including an acknowledgement of the influence of Chartier's *Cultural History: Between Practices and Representation* in which it is claimed that 'cultural history should be the investigation of both historical practices which produced social, cultural and institutional forms, and the interpretations of such practices and forms'.¹¹³ The aim here is to uncover and compare the way in which the cultural image of the village shop was constructed with the way in which it emerges from historical sources. So, the findings from an analysis of various forms of interpretive discourse, including fiction, poetry, ballads and visual imagery, as well as topical discourse, recollections and reminiscences, are compared to 'the cultural and institutional practices of individual agents', in this case the village shopkeeper, the consumer and those in the wider rural community.¹¹⁴ Such evidence of the lived experience is set within the context of what we already know about the history of the village shop. The challenge is substantial but, as Martin suggests, is well worth the effort:

So, as we read about the old community and about social change, the dream of an earthly paradise may seem less real. Nevertheless, the social history of English country life, and the mass of literature which touches imaginatively on historical and social matters, bristle with all kinds of problems and contradictions, and for that very reason remain full of interest and excitement.¹¹⁵

By treating retailing as a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon, this study builds on the pioneering work of Cox and Dannehl on perceptions of retailing, shifting the focus into the nineteenth century. It specifically seeks to ensure that analysis of cultural representations and contemporary attitudes enhances our understanding of rural retailing without obscuring the lived experience. It draws on the works of cultural scholars such as Williams, Bunce, Short and Marsh, which have informed and helped to shape the analysis, providing useful contextual information on the rural-urban narrative, the evolution of idealistic attitudes and nostalgia for the countryside, and the influence of the rise of the urban middle class. This has helped to ensure that the cultural image of the village shop is considered in a wider context, particularly in terms of its role as part of the popular image of the countryside, analysis being forged within the historiography of rural life and community. It has also ensured that consideration is given to ideology, myths and stereotypes, all crucial methodological concerns.

By considering the environment as a social construct, as Short has done, in this case the built environment (i.e. the shop), it is possible to fully appreciate the ways in which the countryside, the village and the rural shop were variously perceived and portrayed during the nineteenth

¹¹³ Muldrew, C., *The Economy of Obligation: The Culture of Credit and Social Relations in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 8.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Martin, E.W., 'Preface' in Martin, E.W. (ed.), *Country Life in England* (London: Macdonald, 1966), 9.

century and how social relations were embodied in cultural expression. By utilising cultural sources or ‘texts’ I can uncover the myths and ideologies informing the way in which the village shop and its keeper were perceived: ‘the analytical distinction should not hide the connectivity between the three. Creators of texts draw upon ideologies and myths, ideologies use selected texts and myths are generalised ideologies’.¹¹⁶

This approach provides an alternative angle from which to analyse the changes which occurred during the nineteenth century, its merits suggested by Mingay:

The historian who troubles to search for the ideas and feelings expressed in now forgotten old poems, songs, and out-of-the-way reminiscences, can do much to reconstruct the traditional culture which has receded beyond the reach of the tape recorder, and...create a sense of what it was really like to live among the villagers of the last century, to share their times of joy and suffering, and the unending toil of earning the daily bread.¹¹⁷

The value of studying cultural representations is succinctly emphasised by Patton, an American scholar writing at the close of the First World War, albeit in relation to the English peasant: ‘If the English peasant is going from the land, let us be grateful that we have him in literature as a permanent possession’.¹¹⁸ In light of the decline in village shops of recent times, this is a pertinent reminder that an analysis of the origins and evolution of the cultural image of rural retailing can provide a complementary angle of enquiry to historical investigation.

The focus of this thesis on the village shop necessarily draws attention to its role in serving ordinary people. Whilst it is clear that those on a restricted income still relied on urban markets and itinerant salesmen to assist in stretching their weekly budget as far as possible, thus far no assessment has been made of how dependent the rural working class were on the village shop in relation to fulfilling their everyday needs or, therefore, how important the shopkeeper was as a service provider to the community. In Chapter 3 the relative importance of the working class to the overall customer base of the village shop is established and their commercial relationship with the village shopkeeper is the focus of analysis, which relates to the contemporary standard of living debate. The perceived role of the village shopkeeper in exploiting the rural proletariat during the first half of the century, particularly the agricultural labourer who emerges from contemporary literature as a representative figure along with the corresponding stereotype of ‘Hodge’, is explored in detail and linked to the generally poor reputation of trade at that time. The validity of accusations of high prices and a monopoly over local retail trade is considered and an assessment made of the ability of the rural poor to manage their debt. It therefore extends the

¹¹⁶ Short, *Imagined Country*, xvii.

¹¹⁷ Mingay, G., ‘Preface’, in Philip, *Victorian Village Life*, 12.

¹¹⁸ Patton, J., *The English Village: A Literary Study 1750-1850* (New York: Macmillan, 1918), 223.

connection which has been made between small-scale shopkeeping and the working-class community, provides detail on the geographical scope of the village shop (customer base) and the sorts of goods which were available, thus building on the work done thus far on the rural consumer by scholars such as Fowler, Buck and Stobart.

There is also a need for fresh research to develop our understanding of the social role of the village shopkeeper and the place and value of the shop within village life. We need to know more about who they were, their friendship and marriage patterns, their social lives and their involvement in local administration and local issues. Therefore, in Chapter 4, having already ascertained the diversity of the clientele of the village shop, the focus shifts from the commercial to the social significance of both shop and shopkeeper within the local community. Consideration is given to the way in which perceptions of the role of the shop as a social space can be linked with evidence of consumer engagement thereby reiterating claims already made in relation to the early modern period. An analysis of the symbolic significance of the shop space also allows for some engagement with perceptions of the changing nature of village institutions. Notably, scrutiny of the portrayal of the shopkeeper as facilitator and participant in sociability, reveals a demarcation along gender lines, the male role infused with value whilst the female role was frequently aligned with the negative connotations of gossip, typically associated with the business of the post office. This gives rise to an assessment of the significance of the rural post office and the gender of village shopkeepers as well as the structure and significance of their connections and their involvement in local governance. By considering the role of gender, this study therefore provides a much needed rural perspective on the role of female shopkeepers, thus providing some parallel for existing assessments of the role of gender in urban shopkeeping. Greater clarity on the place and influence of the shopkeeper within village life builds on the work of Hosgood and Stobart and enriches our understanding of the history of rural life and community.

The last two chapters continue to explore and assess the place and value of the shop within village life and are inextricably linked. Chapter 5 seeks to expand on Cox and Dannehl's claim that the village shop re-emerged in popular culture in the nineteenth century 'when times and circumstances had changed'.¹¹⁹ It is demonstrated how a shift in tone and attitudes in the second half of the nineteenth century aligned with a prevailing rural-urban narrative and led to the absorption of the village shop and its keeper into the concept of a rural idyll. This redefined their established characteristics, particularly the female shopkeeper, diluting the effect of the established negative imagery and countermanding their association with the exploitation of the rural poor. It therefore returns to the themes from Chapter 3, a shift identified in the imagery from elite perspectives on the experience of the rural consumer to the predominance of those of

¹¹⁹ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 45.

the urban middle class. Analysis of the cultural sources is therefore placed within the historical context of the cultural progress of a burgeoning urban middle class, exposing their increasingly idealistic attitudes towards childhood and the countryside. There is also greater focus on the shopkeeper's perspective. The significance of the shopkeeper in the workings of the local credit system, the risks that they undertook and their negotiation with the consumer in the management of debt are established. By engaging more fully with the thoughts and feelings of the shopkeeper and how they viewed themselves within the context of their rural community it takes a less quantitative approach than other chapters. In this regard it also picks up on the findings from Chapter 4, establishing how the attitude of the shopkeeper in relation to their commercial dealings had an impact on the value placed on their role in the rural community. A link is made to contemporary perceptions of debt and debtors therefore drawing on Finn's observations on the character of credit and providing clarity on the rural perspective.

Having established that the village shop and its keeper had been absorbed into the concept of a rural idyll and formed part of a wider rural-urban narrative, Chapter 6 demonstrates how this led to the village shop forming part of a rhetoric of decline in the late nineteenth century. The various threats earmarked in the cultural sources are explored in detail, including the impact of urban retailers, branch shops and co-operative retailing. These are tested by comparing statistics for mid-century with those for the end in order to highlight any change in the extent of rural retail provision. Evidence of the turnover of shopkeepers is also used as part of an assessment of the extent to which village shopkeepers were enterprising and modernising and how this might have increased their chances of survival. This follows in the same vein as Lawson and Hosgood who have given consideration to the longevity of the small shop and therefore contributes to evaluations of the role of small-scale shopkeeping in wider retail development. The chapter ends with a consideration of the myth of the rural idyll which provides some rational context for the rhetoric of decline as well as the findings of Chapter 5, both chapters making a contribution to the wealth of scholarly work which has considered the ideological significance of the countryside and its people. The thesis then finishes where it started, the concluding remarks drawing together some key themes before suggesting how this impacts on the way in which rural retailing is perceived and portrayed in the twenty-first century.

Both change and continuity, tradition and innovation, are considered at various intervals throughout, acknowledging a recent reminder by Mitchell that evidence of continuity should be analysed as vigorously as that of change in order to provide the most realistic interpretation of the past.¹²⁰ For example, the persistence of traditional modes of shopping such as the practice of bartering (Chapter 3 and 5) are highlighted alongside the changing nature of stock (Chapter 5), the impact of co-operative retailing (Chapter 3 and 6), the establishment of a rural postal service

¹²⁰ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*.

(Chapter 4) and evidence of innovative business practices (Chapter 6), all of which formed part of wider developments in village retailing.

To summarise, by exploring the role of consumption and retailing in rural community life, drawing literary, artistic and archival material together to provide a social and cultural context for analysis, this study attempts to broaden our understanding of the retailer-customer relationship. It provides clarity on the place and value of the shop within village life in order to develop our understanding of the impact of retailing within village economies. It also provides a distinctly rural perspective on the interplay of class, status, age, gender, trade and occupation in rural communities thus shedding light on village life and society during the transformative Victorian era, moving away from what has been a predominantly agricultural and production-based perspective. It draws multiple perspectives together in order to answer these fundamental questions: Were perceptions of rural retailing aligned with or at odds with the lived experience? Were they merely a reflection of contemporary attitudes towards retailing and the countryside rather than a fair reflection of reality? Linking what were essentially urban attitudes and perceptions to the rural reality is hard but by firmly embedding analysis within the context of the history of rural life and community as well as that of retailing and consumption, a perspective is provided which is more conducive to an inter-disciplinary approach, the scrutiny of contemporary literature and art providing an alternative, informative and complementary angle of enquiry which ensures that this research is not only relevant and useful but unique.

Methodology: An interdisciplinary approach

The Approach

The originality of this research is rooted in its explicitly inter-disciplinary approach in which the critical examination of the cultural image is explored within the context of the historical experience. This approach presents various methodological issues, not least of which is ensuring that historical and cultural analysis is woven coherently throughout in order to avoid creating a stark dichotomy between the two. Judgement and interpretation needs to be married as much as possible with information and knowledge. However, as the various types of source material share the need for a broadly qualitative and interpretative approach, it has been possible to combine historical research with literary criticism and iconographical analysis. The cultural image of the village shop is set within the context of the ideology of the period and compared with an assessment of the contemporary experience of rural retailing and shopping, the aim being to shed light on the perspective of the shopkeeper and customer by providing evidence of their experiences and, at least in the case of the former, their opinions.¹

The structure helps to overcome methodological issues, the chapter-by-chapter comparative method, driven by themes identified within the cultural sources, establishing a dialogue between each type of evidence.² Essentially, each representational image is established, explored and 'tested' against the reality of the lived experience as revealed by the historical sources. A thematic rather than a chronological approach suits the interdisciplinary nature of the research, although the chapters roughly follow the evolution of the cultural image, which is drawn out during the process of analysis. By focusing on key themes it is necessary to conduct detailed scrutiny and cross-analysis of the sources which helps to avoid neglecting evidence of continuity, a problem highlighted by Stobart who states, 'in searching for change and progress, we neglect important continuities that served to link shopping experiences and environments over the centuries'.³ Where change is identified, particularly in terms of the cultural material, there is also a need, as

¹ This is a method used by John Barrell in his analysis of the depiction of the rural poor in paintings. Barrell, J., *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 1, 4.

² As the thesis is driven by certain key themes identified from the cultural sources (essentially the most prominent), it is important to note that there were others which have not been explored herein as well as some exceptions to the common elements identified within each theme.

³ Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 15.

Williams has suggested, to understand the structure of feeling within which it evolved.⁴

Perspective and perception are a useful starting point in establishing and analysing the cultural image as an appreciation of the multiple variables which influenced the producers and consumers of such material provides the key to understanding its significance (e.g. class, gender, and the social and moral attitudes and opinions of writer and artist, reader and consumer, patron and critic).⁵ Each individual, subject to unique influences and varying motivations and perspectives, subjectively interpreted the experience of rural shopping. Perception is the awareness or understanding of sensory information therefore it can refer to the way in which consumers of the cultural image interpreted what was presented to them but also to the way in which those who actually visited a village shop would have interpreted their own experience or, indeed, how they understood the experiences of those who lived within rural communities. This is acknowledged by Cox and Dannehl:

Culture is made evident in the perceptions of authors and artists, and in the role these have played in shaping others' perceptions, as well as in those of observers who had no artistic pretensions, but yet expressed their views in a more durable media than oral discussion and other vocalizations. All of them were highly personal views, charged with the interpretations of each individual.⁶

Ultimately we communicate as well as learn through texts; it is therefore vital to acknowledge the disparity which could exist between an urban and rural viewpoint on the experience of retailing and shopping in rural communities, between actual experience and perceptions of it. Consideration also has to be given to the conventions of particular genres, the influence of ideology and the open and closed characteristics of texts.⁷ All of these variables make the interpretation of cultural material challenging. Art and literature are forms of representation which rely on communicable codes to express meaning, therefore analysis of such cultural material herein focuses on how the village shop and shopkeeper were deployed or depicted in the artistic and literary canons and who such images were intended to be consumed by; in essence, why they were used as subjects at all.⁸

As the burgeoning urban middle classes emerge as the primary targets of the cultural imagery analysed in this study, their significance warrants some consideration here. They not only bought

⁴ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 35.

⁵ For an extensive analysis of the term 'perception' in relation to portrayal and opinion see Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 4.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁷ For more on the distinction in literary theory between open and closed texts see Short, *Imagined Country*, 158.

⁸ Macleod, D.S., *Art and the Victorian Middle Class: Money and the Making of a Cultural Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 62.

books and accessed libraries but had access to a wide range of periodical literature from the cheaper press to the shilling monthlies and slightly more expensive or specialist publications. As Marjory Lang has suggested, ‘while the demand for entertaining reading spread through all sections of society, it was the middle classes who responded most enthusiastically to new forms of cheap literature’.⁹ They also visited art exhibitions, bought prints and the wealthy might act as patrons. Indeed, it became the prevailing fashion amongst the rising middle classes to solicit depictions of contemporary English life as popularised by artists like Frith who led the way in realistic depictions of scenes of everyday bourgeois activities, often depicting the urban masses on the move and in recreation. Therefore, whilst the whole class spectrum, as consumers of cultural imagery, are represented by the material used in this study, there is a distinct recognition of the importance of the urban middling classes. Indeed, they were not just consumers but also the producers of much of the cultural material, particularly in the mid to late nineteenth century

Aside from the challenges of an interdisciplinary approach, another significant issue is the fact that the cultural image is comprised of art and literature which has a broadly national geographical scope, whilst the survival of the business records of village shops and their inclusion in official records is localised and patchy.¹⁰ However, closer scrutiny has revealed that the majority of the cultural material would have been primarily published or exhibited in London and broadly refers to villages with agricultural rather than industrial economies.¹¹ Essentially, the countryside appears to have been conceived in southern rather than northern terms. Therefore, whilst village shops undoubtedly existed in industrialised areas of rural England, particularly in the north which had a particular connection to the co-operative movement, the focus of this study is the shops of rural agricultural economies in the southern half of England. The historical analysis primarily draws on a series of village micro-studies which broadly represent this area, employing some aspects of the case-study approach, the parish forming the basis for the study of the place and value of the retailer within the village community. The choice of these villages was determined by the existence of useful and comprehensive records relating to a shop which existed in each one. Three counties are represented by these chosen villages, Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire and Kent (See Appendix), whilst others, such as Bedfordshire, Northamptonshire and Suffolk, are represented through the use of supporting material, which gives better cohesion to the ‘national’ feel of the cultural sources. Also, as the constructed image often focuses on portraying or characterising an individual shop or shopkeeper, the case-study

⁹ Lang, M., ‘Childhood’s Champions: Mid-Victorian Children’s Periodicals and the Critics’, *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 13, 1/2 (Spring-Summer 1980), 17.

¹⁰ There are some areas for which the evidence is more concentrated (e.g. the insolvent debtors files in county archives such as Kent (Q/CI) and Buckinghamshire (Q/DA)).

¹¹ Whilst London housed most of the publishers and much of the readership was urban, it is recognised that some publishers were provincial and some material published in London was getting out to the provinces.

approach allows for a similar focus on individuals within the historical analysis, who are essentially lost in macro-historical studies of retailing. Conversely, the ability to conduct county surveys also provides a broader overview in order to test some more general elements of the cultural image. This level of scrutiny allows the lives of the shopkeepers and their customers to take centre stage as in order to understand the social-economic significance of the village shop and shopkeeper within their local community there is a need to understand not only the commercial significance of the business and the engagement of the local population but also the place of the shopkeeper as an individual within the community and the contribution made to local society. Essentially, this method ensures that representations and perceptions of rural retailing, which often present a focused image of individuals (characters) or communities (settings), can be tested against a comparable reality of lived experiences, essentially put in a localised context.

Sources

As this study draws on a range of sources it is useful to consider the various types, why they have been chosen, the ways in which they will be analysed and possible drawbacks.

Literary Culture

Literature published in the nineteenth century, both fiction and non-fiction, is the primary source of material used to establish the cultural image of the village shop and its keeper. However, some late eighteenth-century and Edwardian literature has been included where it provides useful supplementary evidence. Similarly, although the focus is firmly on the English village shop, narrative on the Scottish village shop has also been included due to its relative prominence within the literature compared to the noticeable absence of both the Welsh and Irish equivalent.¹² All references to Scottish village shops are made explicit throughout in order that they can be readily identified.

The periodical press was swiftly identified as a rich and varied source of relevant material which, despite its potential as a cultural mine, has been relatively underused by scholars in comparison with other types of literature such as novels. Two online databases, *GALE 19th Century UK Periodicals* and *ProQuest British Periodicals*, which include a wide variety of published material such as magazines, journals, reviews, comics and newspapers, were surveyed in detail for material, three other databases providing some additional texts.¹³ Over 400 individual items were

¹² In a literary study of the English village, Patton also included literature on the Scottish village for similar reasons. See Patton, *The English Village*, viii.

¹³ Additional databases: Gale Digital Collections: *19th Century British Newspapers*, *British Newspapers 1600-1950* and *The Times Digital Archive, 1785-2008*.

identified; whilst most are exclusively text, some contain useful visual imagery such as engravings, illustrations and, later in the century, photographs (see Visual Culture below).

By focusing on periodical material recognition can be given to the diversity of this type of literary genre and the important role that it had in maximising the size and engagement of the readership therefore providing a cross-class view of the way in which the constructed image of the village shop was presented to and consumed by nineteenth-century society. Periodical journals and magazines, which were published weekly or monthly and varied in price from a halfpenny to half-a-crown (thirty pence), were part of the popular literature, aimed at a mass audience, which expanded rapidly during the Victorian period in both number and circulation as the cost of printing lowered. Not only did the type, ethos and targeted readership of each differ, typically filtered by age, gender and/or class, but the magazine format itself brought together a range of authors, topics and articles. The complexity is highlighted by Beetham, who states that, 'a periodical is not a window on to the past or even a mirror of it. Each article, each periodical number, was and is part of a complex process in which writers, editors, publishers and readers engaged in trying to understand themselves and their society'.¹⁴ The material certainly represents a range of types of literature including fiction, news, journalism, essays, articles, correspondence and competitions which express a range of opinions and reflect various perspectives. The context in which this material was produced and published is considered throughout, assisted by data compiled on the background, history, readership and ethos of each periodical, thereby ensuring that these cultural sources are used as 'historically important discourse'.¹⁵ It must be remembered, however, that *targeted* readership and circulation figures did not necessarily reflect *actual* readership as various literature was often shared, passed on or read aloud, particularly newspapers. Therefore dissemination of the literary material may have been wider than is initially apparent.

Whilst the focus is on the periodical press, a variety of other published sources have also been used including novels, poetry, children's books, social commentary, biographies, autobiographies, ballads and memoirs.¹⁶ All provide useful, often varying, perspectives. Using multiple sources assists in verifying other sources and, as they are not only texts but also cultural artefacts, an appreciation of their contextual nature is also required.¹⁷ Literature certainly acquires an additional value when read with a consideration for its wider social and historical significance.

¹⁴ Beetham, M., 'Towards a Theory of the Periodical as a Publishing Genre', in Brake, L., Jones, A., and Madden, L. (eds.), *Investigating Victorian Journalism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), 20.

¹⁵ Maidment, B.E., 'Victorian Periodicals and Academic Discourse' in Brake et al., *Investigating Victorian Journalism*, 151.

¹⁶ In this regard, various online sources have been used including: Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org; The Internet Archive and Open Library, www.archive.org; Google books, www.books.google.com; Bodleian Library's online archive of broadside ballads (University of Oxford), www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads.

¹⁷ Morgan, 'Producing Consumer Space', 68-9.

An appropriate approach to the material is therefore of paramount importance; as Morgan suggests, 'historical representation is subjective and selective and the ordering of narrative is a personal creation... a degree of reflexivity is required on the part of the researcher; in other words, a sensitivity to the historical framework'.¹⁸ An acute awareness of the mode of the source is also necessary, Williams having pointed out that such material can 'raise questions of historical fact and perspective, but they raise questions, also, of literary fact and perspective'.¹⁹ A piece of literature or a painting can therefore be valued not only within the context of a literary or artistic canon or for its charm, expression or technique but also for its content; realistic depiction, for example, is rendered explicit within its historical context. As each of the chapters contain elements which require setting in context, it has been necessary for some overlap to exist in the use of sources within each chapter. A consideration of the differing perspectives of writer and artist; reader and consumer; observer and participant; patron and critic; shopkeeper, customer and villager also ensures that a balanced interpretation is made. The dual nature of many of the sources, which might be considered to hold both cultural and historical value, is therefore potentially problematic. However, it is the way in which the sources are approached that determines what is learnt from them. For example, the subject matter of biographies, autobiographies and memoirs is filtered through the subjective haze of recollective memory and subject to the influence of nostalgia.²⁰ They therefore present some of the same problems associated with recollective memory as some of the articles published in the periodical literature, the passing of time inevitably altering recollection and perspective. Yet despite their limitations they are immensely important as they add breadth and depth to the analysis, giving a greater insight into the everyday lives of both shopkeeper and customer, often giving detailed descriptions of their appearance, character and relationships, their thoughts and opinions, the exterior and interior of shops, working practices and their relevance to the wider community.²¹ They are therefore used primarily as historical sources (see section below).

¹⁸ Ibid., 68.

¹⁹ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 12.

²⁰ For example: Flora Thompson's literary trilogy, *Larkrise to Candleford*, represents the observations of a child and yet the evaluation is that of an adult therefore it has a 'complex double perspective...the voice which acknowledges the power of memory to recreate and relive the experience of the child is that of the adult who apprehends a changing world'. Dusinberre, J., 'The Child's Eye and the Adult's Voice: Flora Thompson's *Lark Rise to Candleford*', *The Review of English Studies*, 35, 137 (1984), 61.

²¹ For example, two important examples of such texts used in this thesis: The first is a biographical account of the life of Samuel Budgett (1794-1851), a very successful village shopkeeper, turned merchant, in South Gloucestershire who, it is claimed, made his fortune on certain key principles associated with his Methodist faith (another biography was published in 1890 which has also been useful). The second text is less well known and very rare, being an anonymous autobiography of a village shopkeeper, which was published in Scotland in 1876. Whilst the village is not identified in the book, the place of publication and various clues within

Scrutiny of the image created by literary sources has necessitated the textual analysis of the material, the focus being a systematic decoding of the content, including thematic and symbolic elements, in order to determine the overall objective or meaning. As Morgan has explained, it ‘provides a means for evaluating the content, structure and style of written records, not just focusing on language but also the context in which language is used, how it is constructed and the structures carried within language which enable the reproduction of ideas’.²² This allows for consideration to be given to the reader’s interpretation of the text, and the context and popularity of the format in which it is published, which might influence or frame the way in which an author presents or structures their work (i.e. to appeal to a particular readership). For example, Beetham has suggested that there is a ‘struggle over meaning’ in relation to periodicals such as magazines and journals, as the motivation behind publication was not always straightforward, encompassing profit, religious or moral instruction, benevolence or a desire to educate or impart knowledge.²³ Periodicals were not just important in illustrating and reinforcing ideologies, but also in *constructing* them.²⁴ The same can also be said of novels and paintings yet periodicals are perhaps less recognisable in this role. Such literature functioned not only to satisfy the reader’s needs and aspirations and the demands of the market but also to fulfil the agenda of the writer, editor or publisher. Therefore, Burchardt urges that, where possible, literary attitudes must be ‘mediated through the experiences and literary persona of the author’.²⁵ Many were based in urban areas, living and working close to the heart of the publishing trade and providing material which was to be consumed by a predominantly urban readership. This has implications with regard to their portrayal of rural life and society. As one early twentieth-century literary reviewer pointed out, some ‘authors are born in villages, but they seldom stay in them. They flock to the town and gild their youthful visions’.²⁶ This highlights the danger that readers were absorbing ‘a composite picture’ as attempts to construct reality within contemporary literature were coloured by idyllic, nostalgic, ‘hazy’ recollections.²⁷ The readership of much of the periodical material was also metropolitan and largely unconnected to and unfamiliar with the realities of a rural way of life and therefore they were unable to filter such information for fact and fiction effectively. The problem has been reiterated by Keith who states that, ‘the face of the countryside...alters with

the text reveals that the author was Scottish and lived and traded in a coastal village not far from Edinburgh. Arthur, W., *The Successful Merchant: Sketches of the Life of Mr Samuel Budgett, Late of Kingswood Hill, England* (Nashville, 1856); Bayne, P., *Men Worthy to Lead: Being Lives of John Howard, William Wilberforce, Thomas Chalmers, Thomas Arnold, Samuel Budgett, John Foster* (London, 1890); Anon, *The History of a Village Shopkeeper: An Autobiography* (Edinburgh, 1876).

²² Morgan, ‘Producing Consumer Space’, 64.

²³ Beetham, ‘Towards a Theory’, 20-1.

²⁴ Maidment, ‘Victorian Periodicals’, 153.

²⁵ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 8.

²⁶ V.R., ‘A Study of the English Village’, *The Athenaeum*, 4654 (11th July 1919), 587.

²⁷ Ibid.

the perspective from which it is viewed'.²⁸ Textual analysis within this study has therefore included consideration of whether the author was presenting a contemporary or reflective image and whether they were likely to be writing from an informed position, having had experience of rural life. An awareness of the fact that broader cultural factors also inform narratives is also demonstrated although it is acknowledged, as Burchardt points out, that writers 'are of course in the first place individual creative agents and only in the second place components of general cultural trends'.²⁹

Visual Culture

Nineteenth-century visual culture has provided supplementary and complementary material for analysis, not only assisting in the establishment of the cultural image of the village shop and its keeper but also providing an alternative perspective which reveals a great deal about the way in which the imagery was constructed and consumed. Various paintings and prints have been identified, published contemporary reviews of art exhibitions being particularly useful in this process.³⁰ As with the literary sources, all visual sources are analysed within their cultural context, providing an insight into the types of material which would have been predominantly consumed by the upper or middling classes who had access to paintings, either as patrons, as visitors to exhibitions or as consumers of prints (made from engravings of the original paintings and therefore a means by which art could be replicated on a mass scale). However, it should be noted that art also had an increasing influence on the lower ranks of society. The Victorians had an enthusiasm for displaying paintings to the general public and encouraging the poor to visit art exhibitions; the working-class crowds at Sheepshanks Gallery in South Kensington, for example, threatened to endanger the works of art on display.³¹

More widely disseminated were the engravings and illustrations used extensively to illustrate both fiction and non-fiction in an increasing number of books and periodicals aimed at all classes in English society. Numerous such representations of the village shop and shopkeeper have been identified and utilised here, including examples from novels and children's literature. Photographs and postcards depicting rural retailers, which appeared later in the century following various advances in photographic processing and printing, have also been used.

As with the literary sources, analysis of the visual image has required similar considerations, not only of what contemporary consumers might have absorbed from the material and how that might have influenced their opinions but also of the motivation of the artist, the canon in which

²⁸ Keith, W.J., 'The Land in Victorian Literature' in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 78-9.

²⁹ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 67

³⁰ Enquiries have also been made and/or the websites utilised of a variety of museums, galleries and art dealers (see bibliography).

³¹ Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 61.

they were working and the demands of the market (the desires and expectations of the consumer). As Short has indicated, 'creative artists condense social concerns, but give them specific, personal shape and substance'.³² Seeking out the opinion of contemporary critics has also ensured that consideration is given to the broader social and cultural context. The actual interpretation of the visual imagery has involved iconographic analysis (as opposed to aesthetics), which considers how such images were intended to be consumed. Essentially the focus has been on the content and key elements in each image and to establish the meaning of each work in the context of its time.

There are limitations to both literary and visual sources. Firstly, whilst the survey of art and literature has been broad, it is not absolutely comprehensive. The material has been gathered by a variety of means and the databases which have been used to source the literature include a wide-ranging selection of periodicals and novels but of course do not include *all* possible published material. There is also its inevitable selective survival. Sourcing images of some of the paintings has been challenging and, in some cases, unsuccessful; therefore, for some paintings, contemporary reviews have been vital in providing information. Moreover, consumption of both the literary and visual imagery can only be inferred as it cannot be determined exactly, therefore it is useful to consider this study to be based on a survey of *popular* culture.

Historical sources

The surviving business records of a number of village shops, including material typically found in personal family papers which reveals details about the dealings of rural families with local retailers, are the primary sources used to establish the objective position or 'lived experience'. This includes ledgers, day books, pocket books, bills, vouchers, receipts and correspondence, which provide information on customers, stock, the nature and rhythm of spending and the management of debt by rural consumers (thereby indicating the degree of engagement with and dependence on local retailers and the workings of the rural credit system).

As already indicated, the bulk of the analysis focuses on the business records of three retailers (See Appendix), a sampling process used to extract useful detail from these sources. This has necessitated the cross-referencing of a variety of other source material such as parish records (baptisms, marriages and burials), probate records and census returns which not only assist in tracing and identifying customers and their occupations, thereby establishing the customer network and the reach and influence of each shop, but also in ascertaining the identity of local leaders and administrators and identifying personal networks in the local community. Trade directories, which can be cross-referenced to increase accuracy, are also vital in the identification of customers and other local tradesmen and therefore in establishing the nature of local

³² Short, *Imagined Country*, 157.

commerce and competition. They also enable quantitative analysis at a county level and contain general information on both county and village. Trade literature, guides, Parliamentary reports and surveys provide supplementary material which not only sheds light on the lived experience but also on perceptions of rural retailing. Biographies, autobiographies and memoirs are also used in this way, there being some overlap in the use of sources, as suggested above.

Whilst invaluable, like many historical sources which are often complex, incomplete and require some interpretation, all of these sources have their limitations. For example, shop account books typically only detail credit transactions and therefore exclude cash purchases. They also tend to record the transactions under the name of the account holder rather than each particular family member making purchases. The limitations of other archival sources such as trade directories and censuses have been widely recognised and extensively recorded by scholars elsewhere and therefore it is not considered necessary to repeat such observations here.³³ Nonetheless, it is worth noting the potentially misleading way in which trade or occupation were recorded in probate records, census returns and trade directories, as already indicated above. Moreover, the smallest retailing concerns often went unrecorded, the early trade directories particularly problematic as the compilers gave little attention to smaller settlements. These sources are therefore approached with caution and emphasis given to the fact that the figures represent a minimum rather than a maximum. Despite such drawbacks, trade directories are invaluable for quantitative analysis, providing information on shop numbers, types of trade, longevity, gender and ratios of shops to people. Indeed, they have been used in various studies of shopkeeping and rural occupations.³⁴ In order to ensure that analysis at the county level is fair and consistent, directories compiled by the same publisher have been utilised (e.g. the Post Office for the 1850s and Kellys for the 1890s).

Key definitions

Whilst this thesis spans the nineteenth century, it should be noted that there is a particular focus on the Victorian era, which reflects the concentration of cultural material in that period.³⁵ Reference will also be made to the late eighteenth century as well as the Edwardian period which is defined here as 1902 to 1914 (the start of the First World War).

³³ For example, when using trade directories to establish the extent of trading within villages Toplis usefully points out the margins of error and the difficulties involved in establishing whether a tradesperson was actually retailing. Toplis, 'The Non-Elite Consumer', 20-1.

³⁴ For example: Chartres, 'Country Tradesmen'; Chartres, J.A., and Turnbull, G.L., 'Country Craftsmen' in Mingay, *The Victorian Countryside: Volume 1*, pp.314-28; Lawson, 'Shops, Shopkeeping'; Crompton, 'Changes in Rural Service Occupations'.

³⁵ For example, the periodical literature identified spans nearly 150 years (1786-1933) yet only about ten percent relates to the pre- or post-Victorian period.

The focus of this project is on the ‘English village’ yet defining this term, in comparison to the parish, can be problematic. A village is not a legal entity whilst a parish can be easily defined by its geographical boundaries. The village could be defined in terms of its population, yet smaller settlements which had a parish church were also considered villages rather than hamlets. Patten indicates that it is the attributes of a settlement, such as a market and assize court, which indicate its urban status (and therefore the absence of which defines a village or hamlet).³⁶ He has also suggested that it is functions (occupations) and not populations which should classify the importance of a settlement.³⁷ For the purposes of this study, strict classification is not necessary and both village and parish have been taken into account, many of which included one or more hamlets. All of the case-study subjects have confidently been identified as having been villages (and have remained villages), all having a modest population size, a parish church and no market. They are also defined as such in various contemporary literature.

The term ‘village’ itself also presents problems in relation to analysis of the contemporary literature as the use of language can be misleading and has therefore been approached with care. The term was typically used to describe a rural area but was also used by some authors as a localised term to describe what was, in fact, revealed to be a town. The rapid growth in the infrastructure and population of some villages during the nineteenth century meant that in just one generation what might still have been known as ‘the village’ to older members of a community in fact had expanded into a town. The same principle might also be applied to towns which contracted and subsequently became villages. To add to the confusion, the term most widely used at that time to describe the area or land occupied by a village community was ‘Township’.³⁸ Similarly, the words ‘country’, ‘rural’ and ‘provincial’ might often be used as a means to describe an area that was merely outside London and therefore could refer to urban areas such as market towns. Any literary material which has proved difficult to determine absolutely as depicting a rural village shop has been excluded or used in a supplementary capacity where appropriate.

Defining what is to be included within the terms ‘village shop’ or ‘rural retailer’ raises issues relating to the overlap which often existed between production and retailing and the widespread duality of occupation.³⁹ For the purposes of this study, particularly the quantitative analysis, it has been narrowed to include those who predominantly purchased goods from producers, manufacturers or wholesalers to sell on to the end consumer from fixed shop premises, thereby

³⁶ Patten, ‘Village and Town’, 1.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

³⁸ Peake, H., *The English Village: The Origin and Decay of its Community: An Anthropological Interpretation* (London: Benn Brothers Ltd, 1922), 17.

³⁹ For example, Toplis has indicated that as many as eighty percent of village drapers combined their trade with another, usually grocery, hardware or general shopkeeping. Toplis, ‘The Non-Elite Consumer’, 62.

forming part of the supply chain (e.g. drapers, grocers, haberdashers, mercers, provision dealers and general shopkeepers). These are what Jeffrey's has defined as 'retail units proper'.⁴⁰ In larger villages this includes some specialist retailers such as tobacconists, chemists, stationers and glass and china dealers. The definition also includes producer-retailers such as butchers and bakers and any combination of such trades. It excludes craftsmen-retailers (e.g. carpenters, tailors, shoemakers, milliners) and the innkeeper, victualler or beer seller unless such occupations were combined with those already defined, the same applying to the farmer. As retailing can be defined as the sale of goods *or* services, the Post Office is also included, particularly as it was often combined with the retailing of goods. This definition is therefore flexible enough to ensure that the diversity which existed in rural retailing is recognised although it is possible that a small number of those included may not have been retailing (e.g. butcher-farmers). It is important to note that whilst quantitative analysis at the county level takes account of all types of retailer as defined above, such analysis at the village level and corresponding qualitative analysis tends to focus on the role of food retailers, and therefore to the activity of the buying and selling of everyday necessities, which reflects the themes which emerge from the cultural material. In this regard this study represents a useful addition to the historiography of retailing which has largely focused on durable goods and is an adjunct to Stobart's recent research on grocers and groceries for the period up to 1830.⁴¹

It has also been necessary to use a term throughout which encompasses the rural working-class and paupers therefore 'rural poor' is used to refer to agricultural labourers, other labourers (specified and unspecified), other working-class agricultural occupations (e.g. shepherd, gamekeeper, gardener, sawyer, carter, drover, woodman), domestic and unspecified servants and other non-agricultural labouring occupations (e.g. stone miner, road labourer, railway worker, bricklayer). The use of this term is for categorisation purposes only and is not intended to infer anything specific about financial status which could vary considerably.

⁴⁰ Jeffrey's, *Retail Trading*, 1.

⁴¹ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 15.

Serving or exploiting the rural working class? Political, social and moral anxieties about the village shop

Of the various burdens which weigh down the country labourer, few are more heavy than those imposed upon him by the “Conductor” of the village “Omnibus” shop. This great monopolist in a “small way”, demands three times the value for the trashy, but indispensable articles of the depot; and even if an opposition “concern” should be started, that brings no relief to the labourer, because he is harnessed to the “old one”, by the halter of debt, which he has been kindly permitted to slip over his own head...the sleek thriving shopkeeper fattens like a very vampyre, not exactly on the blood, but truly by the sweat of his poor customer’s brow.¹

This damning statement is the opening paragraph to a seven-chapter story published in the fashionable ladies periodical, *Court and Lady’s Magazine*, shortly after the advent of Queen Victoria’s reign. The description of the village shopkeeper as a grasping, monopolistic general retailer or ‘vampyre’, who exploits poor customers with highly priced, low quality goods and inescapable debt, is then exemplified within the subsequent story in the fictional character of Mrs Flint, an ‘eager twinkle of an avaricious eye, seeming to say, “I’ll grasp all,” while the pursed up-mouth responded, “and I’ll keep all”.’² She is ‘exposed’ by the narrator as devoid of pity and dishonest in her dealings with her working-class customers. She sold ‘rancid butter and musty flour...damaged calicoes, moth-eaten stuffs, and sundries of “fleecy hosiery,” all well adapted for fleecing those who bought them’.³ Her scales, it is also suggested, ‘always turned in favour of herself’.⁴ Mrs Flint is a fictional villain yet she serves as more than just a character in a story; she is an allegorical representation of the author’s social and moral opinions, as revealed in the opening statement. The message that was being conveyed to the magazine’s elite female audience was one of sympathy for the poor rural labourer, most often represented in contemporary literature by the familiar figure of the agricultural labourer and the corresponding stereotype of ‘Hodge’. The rural working class are portrayed as helpless in their role as rural consumers, the

¹ Domino, ‘Matthews, and the Last Days of Mrs Flint: A Domestic Sketch’, *The Court and Lady’s Magazine, Monthly Critic and Museum*, 18 (May 1840), 404.

² *Ibid.*, 405.

³ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 406.

blame for their plight directed towards the village shopkeeper who is accused of exploitation and dishonesty. As this chapter will reveal, this appears to echo the wider sentiment of the early nineteenth century.

In an assessment of eighteenth-century perceptions of retailing, Cox and Dannehl have highlighted the various political, social and moral anxieties which were expressed in relation to rural retailing, relating to the perceived moral dangers of credit and luxury and the alleged threat that certain imported goods posed to the industriousness of the poor.⁵ In exploring the nineteenth-century perspective, this chapter builds on their initial observations by demonstrating how the specificities of such anxieties shifted and changed. As will be shown, the village shop formed part of wider debate on the position and prospects of the agricultural labourer, its cultural image being moulded in a distinctly negative form, reflecting wider contemporary attitudes towards retailing and commerce. Notably, whilst Walsh has identified that social discourse on the activity of urban shopping in the early-modern period drew on a different strand of thinking to economic commentators, this does not appear to have been the case for the rural experience during the early nineteenth century.⁶ The concern and criticism underpinning the rhetoric was perpetuated within periodical literature, in both fiction and non-fiction, and these concerns persisted, elements of the negative cultural image of the village shop enduring into the Edwardian period and beyond.

Exploring the roots of this negative imagery and comparing it to the experiences of the rural working-class consumer this chapter is an attempt to assess the purpose and validity of the cultural image of the village shop in the first half of the nineteenth century. In an exploration of its nature, creators, target audience and the perceptions which were being created and influenced, the first section focuses on setting it within a wider historical context. This exposes close links to the poor reputation of retailing and the concerns and anxieties of urban society as well as highlighting the significance of general retailing to the emergent cultural image.⁷ The second section narrows the analysis, focusing on the link between the village shop and rhetoric on the plight of the agricultural labourer. Using evidence from shop ledgers and other relevant sources it specifically assesses the validity of criticism aimed solely at rural retailers, which accused them of exploiting the rural poor through systematic high prices, a retail monopoly and the burden of debt. This establishes the relative significance of the rural poor as consumers in their local

⁵ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 42-5. See also: Richardson, T.L., 'The Agricultural Labourer's Standard of Living in Kent 1790-1840' in Oddy and Miller, *The Making of the Modern British Diet*, 105; Cox, 'Beggary of the Nation', 26-51; Hoppit, J., 'Attitudes to Credit in Britain, 1680-1790', *The Historical Journal*, 33, 2 (1990), pp.305-322.

⁶ Walsh, 'Productive Shopping'.

⁷ An analysis of the cultural image of urban retailers is beyond the remit of this project but, where not made explicit, it is reasonable to suppose that much of the general criticism which is discussed was not directed exclusively at rural retailers.

community, particularly in relation to the purchase of sustenance goods. It should be noted that the inadequacy of agricultural wages and the low standard of living of the rural poor are not under scrutiny here, both being well documented elsewhere; instead the focus is on critically engaging with the negative imagery, aiming to establish whether village shopkeepers deserved such condemnation.

The creation of a negative cultural image

The lowly reputation of rural retailers during the early nineteenth century aligns with the generally negative image of trade at that time, an ancient theme. Although various texts had begun to espouse the benefits of trade by the late eighteenth century, wider attitudes towards trade and retailing were generally poor, shopkeepers seemingly able to command little respect from the authorities or from influential figures, intellectuals and writers, Daniel Defoe being a notable exception.⁸ The wide dissemination of negative opinion is exemplified by the satirical treatment of retailing within broadside ballads, which were aimed at a broad spectrum of society.⁹ Criticism continued into the nineteenth century, the stigma of trade reflected in popular fiction during the first half of the century, which, prior to the widespread serialising of novels within periodical literature, was primarily accessible to and read by the middling and elite members of society.¹⁰ Later in the century it was also linked to the reputation of the nation in topical essays by various writers and persisted into the Edwardian period, an article on ‘Shopkeepers’ published in the conservative weekly magazine, *The Spectator*, asking why the occupation ‘always seems to be held in such low esteem’ and suggesting that shopkeepers were still seen as ‘men of little souls and big pockets who have no sense of heroism, physical or moral, and are always ready to sell anything’.¹¹

Some of the earliest published commentary on village shops suggests that their public image had been forged out of this general unease with retailing. In the early modern period it formed part of wider critical commentary on the growing numbers of retailers; an oft-quoted

⁸ For further information (including on Defoe) see: Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 149; Cox, *The Complete Tradesman*, chapter 1; Cox, ‘Beggary of the Nation’, 26-51; Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 21-2, 187.

⁹ For example: Anon, ‘The Honest Grocer’ (London, 1780-1812), Bodleian Library Catalogue of Ballads (Harding B 25 (857)); Anon, ‘The Chandlers Shop’ (London, 1790-1840), Bodleian Library Catalogue of Ballads (Harding B 17 (45b)); Anon, ‘Chandlers Shop’ (London, 1838-45), Bodleian Library Catalogue of Ballads (Harding B 11 (566-7)).

¹⁰ For example: Austen, J., *Pride and Prejudice* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1992, originally published 1813), 20; 25; 36; 131; 134, 239; Austen, J., *Emma* (London: Penguin, 1994, originally published 1816), 174; Bronte, C., *Shirley* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1993, originally published 1849), 127-8; Gaskell, E., *The Cranford Chronicles* (London: Vintage, 2007, originally published 1851), 97, 222, 245.

¹¹ E.B., ‘Shopkeepers’, *The Spectator*, 4556 (23rd October 1915), 533. Other examples: Anon, ‘Art.VIII – The Social Sores of Britain’, *The North British Review*, 47, 94 (December 1869), 506; Brodrick, G.C., ‘A Nation of Amateurs’, *The Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 48, 284 (October 1900), 531.

seventeenth-century observer, for example, wrote scathingly of the increase in village shopkeepers and the threat they posed to urban shops and markets, declaring that ‘now in every country village where is (it may be) not above ten houses, there is a shopkeeper, and one that never served any apprenticeship to any shopkeeping trade whatsoever’.¹² This suggests a perceived amateurism associated with village retailing, yet it is worth noting, as Cox and Dannehl have highlighted, that there was a ‘dichotomy between those who viewed retailing through the eyes of a customer or retailer – and nearly all people were either one or the other’ and those who saw retailing in ‘abstract economic and political terms’.¹³ This is reiterated by Stobart who claims that most consumers are likely to have had a very different perspective on the increase in rural retailers to the economic theorists of the day; for them, it meant easier access to goods.¹⁴ It is therefore important to consider the profound influence that urban or metropolitan views of the rural had on the creation of this negative cultural image.

Both artists and writers deemed the village shop an unsavoury subject which contaminated the rural and village landscape. This is rather strikingly demonstrated in a painting of a village scene by the landscape gardener, Humphry Repton, in 1816 (Figure 3.1). Various aspects of the original image are erased in the revised version, including a butcher’s shop, as explained by Worrall:

To shut them...out from his view is the way to impose the Picturesque aesthetic onto the economy of the village. For his own backyard, so to speak, Repton uses the theory of the ‘appropriation’ of scenery that he had long been recommending to others interested in procuring Picturesque effects.¹⁵

Repton appears to have felt compelled to remove evidence of trade and commerce from his carefully constructed image of village life although, interestingly, the inn remained. This appears to echo the way in which various contemporary artists painted agricultural workers out of the rural landscape. As Barrell has observed, Thomas Gainsborough took ‘as little account as possible of the figures in his landscapes’ whilst the rural workers of John Constable inhabited ‘the dark side of the landscape’, the figures ‘often so small as almost to escape our notice’.¹⁶ There was

¹² Anon, *The Trade of England Revised* (1681) in Thirsk, J. and Cooper, J.P., (eds.), *Seventeenth-Century Economic Documents* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), 397.

¹³ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 22.

¹⁴ Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 52.

¹⁵ Worrall, D., ‘Agrarians Against the Picturesque: Ultra-radicalism and the Revolutionary Politics of Land’ in Copley, S., and Garside, P. (eds.), *The Politics of the Picturesque: Literature, Landscape and Aesthetics since 1770* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 249. Analysis of Repton’s painting in this regard is also in Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 38-9.

¹⁶ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 6. See also: Reay, *Rural England*, chapter 8. Reay demonstrates how rural workers were absent from or caricatured and romanticised in much of the literary and artistic canon. Short also highlights the more literal interpretation of the countryside as a landscape without figures, Short, *Imagined Country*, 75.



Fig. 3.1 'View from my cottage in Essex', before and after improvement. 1816. Humphry Repton. Source: Repton, H., *Fragments on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening including some Remarks on the Grecian and Gothic Architecture* (London, 1816).

clearly a taste for images which rendered the rural working class invisible to their contemporary superiors, the work and trade of ordinary rural people not considered aesthetically pleasing at that time. As the landowning elite were exerting physical control over the countryside, by enclosing the land and transforming their parks and gardens into ordered, landscaped areas, some even demolishing villages or relocating unpleasing buildings, so artists were producing depictions of the countryside which flattered their sensibilities.

Cox and Dannehl have specifically noted the lack of visual representations of rural retailing, both artists and writers in the eighteenth century depicting the country as ‘devoid of shops’, the village shop ‘virtually expunged from the literary and visual record’.¹⁷ Rural shops, they suggest, ‘were not only felt to be unproductive, they were also seen as unromantic’.¹⁸ It seems that they had no place in depictions of the rural landscape at that time, artists typically idealising and romanticizing the countryside and rural life through reflections of the pastoral tradition or in aesthetic expressions of the beautiful or the sublime. By the early nineteenth century producer-retailers such as village butchers and bakers had received some limited attention from artists and the architect, P.F. Robinson, included a drawing of a village butcher’s shop in his 1837 book on *Village Architecture*.¹⁹ Yet those more exclusively involved in retailing rather than producing goods, such as grocers, continued to be excluded from mainstream art, there being just a few notable exceptions. A genre painting entitled ‘The Village Shop’ by William Redmore Bigg (1755-1828), for example, is an early example (Figure 3.2). It reflects the waning in the early nineteenth century of interest in pastoral culture and depictions of Arcadia as the appetite for images of everyday life (and descriptions of such images within the periodical press) grew, particularly those which ‘told more complicated stories...of change and conflict’.²⁰ This new realistic style, which often reflected an anti-pastoral agenda, placed figures much more centrally within the scene, often in domestic settings.²¹ Village scenes became popular as the attention of artists was transferred away from the agricultural landscape and onto the village centre and rural society.

In the early part of the century various genre artists adopted a realistic style, their unsentimental, less subjective depiction of rural life mirrored in literary culture, represented by the counter-pastoral of George Crabbe’s poem, *The Village* (1783) and the subsequent type of

¹⁷ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 29, 45-6. In contrast, they demonstrate that certain forms of retailing such as markets, were considered acceptable and picturesque.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹ Robinson, P.F., *Village Architecture, Being a Series of Picturesque Designs for The Inn, The Schoolhouse, Almshouses, Markethouse, Shambles, Workhouse, Parsonage, Townhall and Church* (London, 1837), plate 17. Examples of paintings of village butchers and bakers include ‘The Village Butcher’ (undated) and ‘The Village Baker’ (undated) by John Cranch (1751-1821) and ‘The Village Butcher’ (c.1800) by George Morland.

²⁰ Solkin, D.H., *Painting Out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 39, 41, 79, 237.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 87; Reay, *Rural Englands*, chapter 8.

social observation demonstrated by William Cobbett and Jane Austen, which Williams suggests ‘marks the essential preparation for transition from the sympathetic poem to the realistic novel’.²² However, genre art could also be imaginative or romantic and Bigg was known for subscribing to a school of thought which idealised rural life and demonised urban life, a posthumous review of his work revealing that his subjects were: ‘generally little harmless and blameless episodes from village life’.²³ His painting is certainly an idealistic image, produced to appeal to those who preferred a sanitised version of everyday life over the often striking realism adopted by some of his contemporaries. As Solkin has observed, it represents one of the many ‘anodyne depictions of the deserving poor’ which ‘portray the lower orders as perfectly conforming to bourgeois codes of propriety’.²⁴



Fig. 3.2 ‘The Village Shop’. 1809. Oil on canvas. William Redmore Bigg. Source: Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 237.

²² Williams, *The Country and the City*, 109.

²³ Leslie, G.D., and Eaton, F.A., ‘The Royal Academy in the Present Century’, *Art Journal* (February 1899), 43.

²⁴ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 237.

A more realistic style was adopted by Edward Villiers Ripplingille whose depiction of rural retailing in ‘The Post Office’ (1819) (Figure 3.3), gave him his first major success at the Royal Academy, the scene reworked for his later painting, ‘A Country Post Office’ (1837) (Figure 3.4).²⁵ Ripplingille’s first attempt was very favourably reviewed in *The Literary Gazette*, the author commending his choice of subject, reflecting popular interest in the rapidly evolving postal service, whilst another, writing in *The Examiner*, described it as a ‘capital picture’.²⁶ The painting is full of detail which depicts the contrast between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have-nots’, one contemporary reviewer of his later painting suggesting it ‘is an amusing collecting of the heads of a village, fat and pompous, thin and prying, with a touch here and there of pathos’.²⁷ Significantly, Solkin’s analysis of the painting draws attention to the role of the post office as a commercial centre serving the needs and wants of more affluent members of rural society. He claims that ‘rather than uniting the local citizenry, the commodities imported from the capital appear to have created divisions within the community, or at the very least to have sharpened pre-existent ones. Here the poor look with envy upon the goods destined for the rich, or sit sadly excluded from the affluence around them’.²⁸ Ripplingille was clearly commenting on economic inequalities, emphasising the role of the rural shop in exacerbating such division.²⁹ Rather less popular was ‘The Widow’ (1823) by William Mulready, depicting a scene in the back parlour of a village shop, which was criticised for its treatment of ‘a very uninviting subject’, the influential art critic, Ruskin, declaring his choice of subjects more generally as ‘unfit for pictorial representation’.³⁰ Whilst contemporary critics were most likely criticising his depiction of seduction, the painting loosely based around the story of the Dame of Ephesus, his decision to use the setting of a village shop may well have contributed to the general unease and its failure to sell until 1841.³¹

²⁵ The original of the 1819 painting has been lost, only an 1829 replica surviving. It should be noted that neither painting can be irrefutably confirmed as set in a village shop. A review of the 1819 Royal Academy exhibition states that it could be ‘a street in the town or village’ whilst a review of the later version confidently claims that it depicted a village. More recently, Solkin has also appeared undecided, at first suggesting that it is set in a village but later stating ‘quaint English town’. Anon, ‘Fine Arts: Review of the Exhibition at the Royal Academy’, *The New Monthly Magazine and Universal Register*, 11, 66 (July 1819), 547; Anon, ‘Art-Treasures at Manchester’, *The Athenaeum*, 1540 (2nd May 1857), 565; Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 193-8.

²⁶ Anon, *The Literary Gazette and Journal of the Belles Lettres*, 3, 121 (15th May 1819), 315; Anon, ‘Fine Arts: Royal Academy Exhibition’, *The Examiner*, 751 (26th May 1822), 331.

²⁷ Anon, ‘Art-Treasures’, 565.

²⁸ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 196. For a more detailed analysis of the painting in relation to the depiction of the rural poor see pp.193-198.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁰ Pointon, M., ‘William Mulready’s “The Widow”: A Subject ‘Unfit for Pictorial Representation’, *The Burlington Magazine*, 119, 890 (May 1977), 348. Whilst the painting is clearly set in a shop it cannot irrefutably be confirmed as a village shop; however, it was interpreted as such by at least one contemporary reviewer. Anon, ‘Fine Arts’, *The Graphic* (7th January 1888), 11.

³¹ Pointon, ‘William Mulready’s “The Widow”’, 351.



Fig. 3.3 'The Post Office'. 1829 replica of lost original exhibited RA 1819. Oil on wood. Edward Villiers Ripplingille. Source: Leeds Museums and Galleries (Lotherton Hall), inventory number LEEAG.PA.1955.0026.0024.



Fig. 3.4 'A Country Post Office'. 1837. Oil on canvas. Edward Villiers Ripplingille. Source: The British Postal Museum & Archive.

The shop was also depicted as a contaminant of the picturesque village landscape in contemporary literature. This is more notable in periodical literature than the novel as Jane Austen paints a relatively positive view of the specialist village shop in her 1816 novel, *Emma*. Ford's, a drapery and haberdashery in the village of Highbury, is described as 'the shop first in size and fashion in the place', a newcomer to the village, Frank Churchill, playfully declaring that 'this must be the very shop that everybody attends every day of their lives...pray let us go in, that I may prove myself to belong to the place, to be a true citizen of Highbury'.³² Providing a contrast to Austen's depiction of the rural shop is a short story published in 1843 in the shilling monthly magazine, *The Ladies Cabinet*, which was aimed at an upper middle-class female audience. It opens with a hyperbolic description of the picturesque rural setting including a 'fantastic rustic building, with...chimneys wreathed with luxuriant ivy, adding grace to the picture'.³³ Yet this building is then revealed to be 'merely that of a receiving-house for letters and parcels...[and] a thriving and well-accustomed village-shop, contaminating the picturesque old-fashioned bay-window of the fancy letter-house, by the vulgarities of red herrings, tobacco, onions, and salt butter'.³⁴ So, whilst the building was considered an acceptable part of the picturesque rural scene, the author suggests that the trade is vulgar and should not be considered part of the idyllic rural landscape, a seemingly contrived point made to satisfy the sensibilities of the magazine's genteel female readers.

The story formed part of a body of literature which perpetuated a derogatory image of rural retailing from which a variety of key elements have been identified, each adding to the weight of negative opinion. Firstly, the literature reflected a perception within respectable society that shopkeepers were nauseatingly servile.³⁵ Hardy Woolley, a village shopkeeper in Moulton in Lincolnshire who wrote two books of trade hints for country shopkeepers in 1847 and 1862, was well aware of this charge and cautioned his readers against such behaviour: 'as for your dapper little counter fellows who have nothing to say but an everlasting "now, ma'am", "what next ma'am", "much obliged ma'am", why a cuckoo clock, or other automaton figure would do nearly as well in a village shop'.³⁶ He suggests that 'by reading and studying some of the arts and refinements of life...we may get rid of that servile shopkeeperism of style with which we are

³² Austen, *Emma*, 134, 151.

³³ Anon, 'The Widow of Aberleigh', *The Ladies' Cabinet of Fashion, Music, and Romance* (1st March 1843), 156.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁵ For an example of the village shopkeeper described in this way see: Lawson, H., 'Letters to Jack Cornstalk: III: From an Australian in London: A Midland Village', *The Argosy*, 73 (February 1901), 187.

³⁶ H.UU., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers, or, how to attract customers* (Moulton, 1847), 39-40.

taunted and distinguished by the keen-eyed critical writers of the present day.³⁷ So, Woolley was aware of contemporary stereotypes being applied to his trade and sought to challenge them. Yet, it was a derisive caricature which was stubbornly persistent as shown in an article published in *The Spectator* in 1915, which also pondered its validity:

Seen through the eyes of the caricaturist – who is an excellent interpreter of public opinion – the man of the counter is a suave, smiling, bowing creature with oiled hair and no brains who is always trying to make people buy what they do not want...one and all are food for sneers and jeers on the part of novelists, dramatists, and other followers of the writing profession.³⁸

The author admits that ‘there is some truth in most generalisations’ yet finds it ‘difficult to discover any in this one’, concluding that the accusations against the shopkeeper ‘are disbelieved by the observant, and shopkeepers and their friends can afford to disregard the opinions of the unobservant and the superficial’.³⁹ The author therefore makes a useful point, highlighting the gap which could exist between the ‘unobservant’, ‘superficial’ and rather disdainful image and the ‘observant’ reality. Indeed, the behaviour for which shopkeepers were mocked was likely to have been their attempts to demonstrate deference as they tailored their ‘performance’ to suit the rank of each customer therefore any offence caused was no doubt unintended.

Accusations of false weights and measures and dishonest practice added to the generally poor reputation of retailers, village shopkeepers being as much a target for such criticism as their urban counterparts. As early as 1773, a letter published in the *Leeds Mercury* drew attention to this whilst specifically making the link between smaller retailers and the exploitation of the poor:

the petty shopkeepers...the next class of oppressors. Far from a market, the poor are forced to buy all their necessaries at these petty chandlers, who never fail to set their prices high enough...But a still greater evil is their false weights or scales; the scale in which they weigh their goods being considerably heavier than the other, to hide which they never exchange weights without putting in one weight before they take out the other.⁴⁰

Such practices were widely derided. Those who committed such petty fraud were scorned and the reporting of prosecutions would certainly have played a part in reinforcing the negative image of

³⁷ Woolley, H., *Woolley's Trade Hints: A Manual for Grocers: Hints for Shopkeepers and How to Attract Customers* (Moulton, 1876, fourth edition, originally published 1862), 44. The census returns for Moulton list Hardy Woolley as a grocer and postmaster in 1851, a postmaster in 1861 and druggist and grocer in 1871. Census of England: Moulton, Lincolnshire (1851-71).

³⁸ E.B., ‘Shopkeepers’, 533.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 534.

⁴⁰ Letter signed as “Yorkshire Amicus Pauperis”, *Leeds Mercury*, 4 (17th August 1773) quoted in Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 149.

retailing in the wider national consciousness. It was a particularly pervasive and persistent accusation, continuing to appear in literature over one hundred years later, even in children's magazines such as the penny weekly, *Chums*, which made the country shopkeeper the subject of a satirical joke:

A country shopkeeper purchased of an old woman a quantity of butter, the lumps of which, intended for pounds, he weighed in a balance and found wanting. "It's your own fault if they are light," said the dame... "for wasn't it a pound of your own soap I bought here myself that I weighed them with?"⁴¹

The insinuation that a rural shopkeeper might defraud customers with whom he dealt regularly and who were also supplying him with goods is striking and may well have been considered a useful lesson for juveniles.

Well aware of the dangers of dishonesty in trade, Hardy Woolley, urged his readers to avoid it:

let not a particle of the skin-flint peep out in your dealings, literality in the trade is always attractive, once let a customer catch you cheating, or as some people have it "chizzeling" or pinching in weight, he will never forget it, you are a marked man.⁴²

Various shopkeepers found themselves fined for such behaviour, a record for the petty sessions at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk in 1852, for example, recording the names, trades and fines of nine village retailers which ranged from five to fifteen shillings.⁴³ This had the potential to be ruinous for a shopkeeper as accusations and rumours, whether proven or not, could cause irreparable damage to a shopkeeper's reputation. The memoirs of Syd Tyrrell, a tailor's son who was born in Eydon, Northamptonshire in 1889, includes his recollections of the alleged dishonesty of Raymond Gostick, a baker, grocer and beer retailer (Figure 3.5), implying that he was even willing to cheat his own family:⁴⁴

Raymond's sister, Mrs Watson, went into the shop one day and asked for lard. "Which will you have? He asked, "fourpence or fivepence a pound?" "Oh I'll have the best," Mrs

⁴¹ Anon, Untitled joke, *Chums* (17th August 1898), 831.

⁴² Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 16.

⁴³ SRO: Q/APw/1 (pt), Record for the petty sessions at Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk on 7th September 1852.

⁴⁴ Census returns and trade directories indicate that in the early 1880s Raymond Gostick took over the shop from his father, John, who had run it since the 1840s. In the 1881 census he is listed as a grocer, baker and Methodist preacher. Census of England: Eydon, Northamptonshire (1881); *Post Office Directory of Northamptonshire* (Kelly and Co., 1847); *Post Office Directory of Berkshire, Northamptonshire, and Oxfordshire; with Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Huntingdonshire* (Kelly and Co., 1854), 426; *Royal County Directory of Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, Oxfordshire, Huntingdonshire and Northamptonshire* (J.G. Harrod & Co., 1876), 1015; *Kelly's Directory of Northamptonshire* (Kelly and Co., 1885), 338-9.

Watson said. Later on she found both slabs of lard in the shop came out of the same cask. The tale went round the village and caused no end of amusement. It was said he altered the markings on casks of beer sold to the navvies and took a bowlful or two of barley meal out of bags sold as if they'd come from the millers. Men tarred him in the shop for weighing his thumb on the scales.⁴⁵

As Gostick was a local Wesleyan preacher, Tyrrell's father 'intended bringing his dishonesty before the Circuit Local Preachers Meeting' and shortly afterwards the shopkeeper and his family stopped going to chapel, Gostick never speaking to Tyrrell's father again.⁴⁶ Whether this was an unspoken admission of guilt or a protest against false accusers is unclear and Tyrrell admits that he is unsure how much of the rumour was true. Whilst such memoirs are hampered by limitations as sources, not least of which is the subjective viewpoint, they are useful in providing an insight into the business practices of village shopkeepers or, at the very least, in providing an idea of local perceptions.

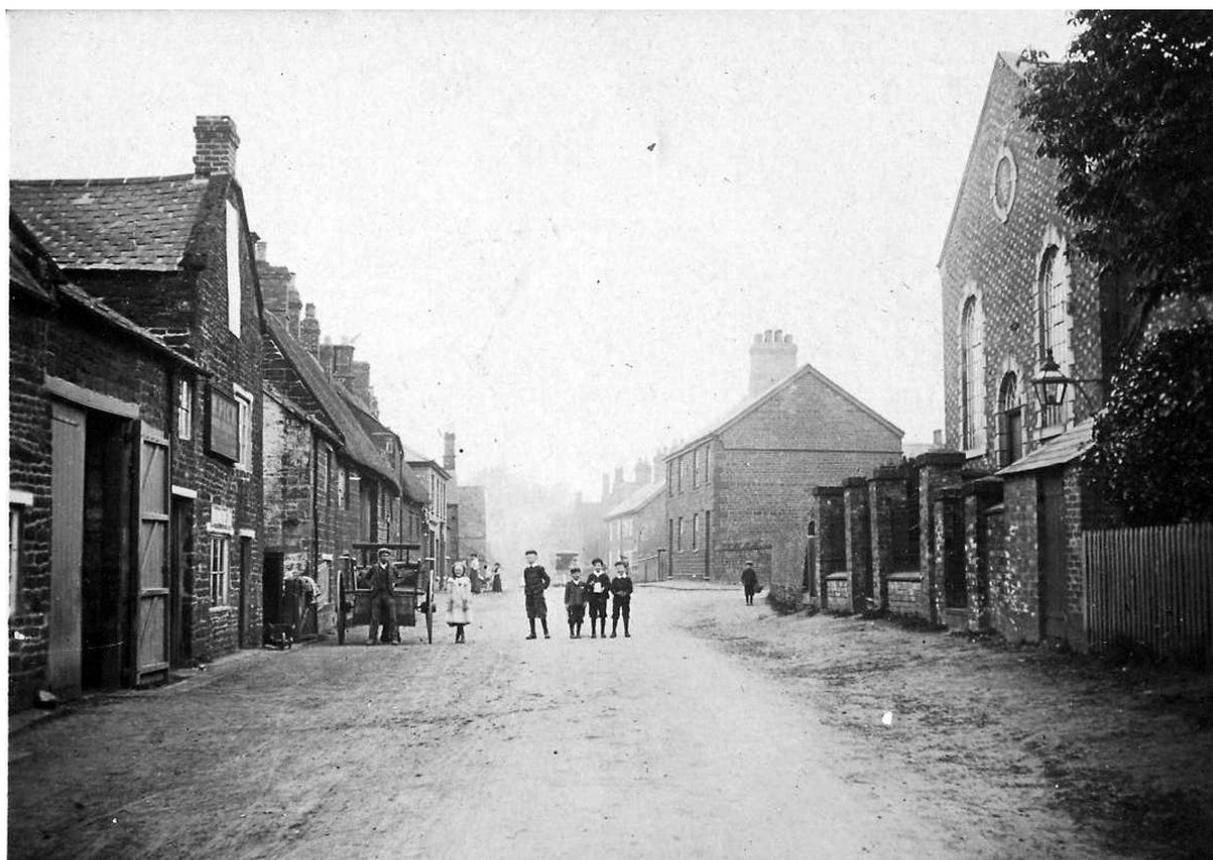


Fig. 3.5 Photograph of a village shop in Eydon, Northamptonshire previously occupied by Raymond Gostick. c.1907.⁴⁷ Source: Eydon Historical Research Group.

⁴⁵ Tyrrell, S.J., *Syd Tyrrell's Eydon* (Eydon: Eydon Historical Research Group, 2001), 102.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 102-3.

⁴⁷ The view looks south down Eydon High Street, the shop on the left beyond the open cart gate

The adulteration of goods was also a widespread problem associated with dishonest practice, as noted more recently by Bensley in *The Village Shop*:

When goods were weighed or bagged, it was not difficult for the unscrupulous trader to adulterate his stock. Chalk could be added to flour, brick dust to chocolate, sand or chicory to coffee, pea and bean husks or sheep dung to tea.⁴⁸

Whilst such practices did not originate in the nineteenth century, awareness was certainly increased when their proliferation was exposed by the chemist and medical professions.⁴⁹ The true extent is impossible to determine although Burnett goes as far as to suggest that the consumer was to a large extent at the mercy of the retailer whose business during much of the century was conducted on the maxim of the Common Law, ‘Caveat emptor’ (‘Let the buyer beware!’).⁵⁰ The publication of the concerns of various observers and the accusations, claims and counter-claims of merchants and tradesmen dramatically increased public interest, at least in urban areas, and anxiety over the precarious position of the consumer permeated popular culture including ballads and satirical magazines like *Punch*.⁵¹

Increasing anxiety for the consumer forms the basis of an alternative, more literal, interpretation of Christina Rossetti’s poem, “Goblin Market”, composed in 1859, which emphasises it ‘as a tale of the market’ and the goblins’ wares ‘as actual groceries’.⁵² The story describes the tempting fruit offered by the animal-like “goblin merchant men” to two sisters:

door. The open door seen behind the small wheel barrow was where the bakery ovens were located. At the time the photograph was taken the shop was occupied by H. Pick, who took over from Gostick before 1901.

⁴⁸ Bensley, *The Village Shop*, 18.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Accum, F., *A Treatise on Adulterations of Food, and Culinary Poisons, exhibiting the fraudulent sophistications of bread, beer, wine, spirituous liquors, tea, coffee, cream, confectionery, vinegar, mustard, pepper, cheese, olive oil, pickles, and other articles employed in domestic economy and methods of detecting them*, Second edition, (London, 1820).

⁵⁰ Burnett, J., *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the present day* (London: Nelson, 1966), 90.

⁵¹ There are numerous examples, a selection being: Anon, ‘Chandler’s Shop’; Anon, ‘Adulteration of Food’, *John Bull and Britannia*, 1, 863 (25th August 1856), 537; Anon, ‘Adulteration of Food’, *Bell’s Life in London and Sporting Chronicle* (23rd December 1860), 3; Anon, ‘Adulteration (Echoes from the Shops)’, *Moonshine*, 166 (7th October 1882), 184; Anon, ‘Adulteration’s Artful Aid; or, Food for Reflection’, *Funny Folks*, 668 (10th September 1887), 299; Anon, ‘The Adulteration Era’, *Fun*, 53, 1348 (11th March 1891), 100; Anon, ‘More Sufferers from Adulteration’, *Illustrated Chips*, 259 (17th August 1895), 8. Examples from *Punch* include Anon, ‘Punch’s Sermons to Tradesmen: To the Grocer’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 20 (1st February 1851); Anon, ‘The Use of Adulteration’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 29 (1855), 47.

⁵² Early reviewers tended to interpret the poem as a Christian parable whilst in the 1970s and 1980s the significance of gender and sexuality were drawn out. Stern argues that it is only more recently that it has been read as a ‘tale of the market’, Stern, R., “‘Adulterations Detected’: Food and Fraud in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market””, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57, 4 (March 2003), 478.

Lizzie, who abstains, and Laura, who succumbs and falls ill and ‘seemed knocking at Death’s door’.⁵³ Lizzie’s suspicions keep her healthy and when re-entering the market her resistance to the goblins’ desperate, aggressive, violent attempts to get her to taste the fruit provides the “antidote” that her sister required. Following general scholarly consensus that the poem is a parable, Stern suggests that this poem reflected popular concern about food adulteration, market seductions and fraud more generally; that ‘behind its apparent wholesomeness, this fruit proves decidedly sinister’ and that the goblins are motivated by ‘profit and exploitation’.⁵⁴ Yet, seemingly overlooked by Stern is a line in Rossetti’s conclusion to the poem in which Laura, having married and had children, warns of:

The wicked, quaint fruit-merchant men,
Their fruits like honey to the throat
But poison in the blood;
(Men sell not such in any town)⁵⁵

This suggests that the poisoned fruits were not sold in town, thereby insinuating that they were only found in rural areas, aligning with the poem’s pastoral setting; thus, if Stern’s interpretation is followed, this specifically implicates rural traders.

Burnett suggests that systematic adulteration was ‘essentially a phenomenon of urban life’ yet a variety of evidence indicates that petty adulteration was also very much a part of rural life and that village shopkeepers were subject to the same accusations of adulteration and dishonesty as urban retailers as reflected in the articles and fiction of monthly magazines.⁵⁶ Evidence of sharp practice can be found in the recollections of Jack Mosdell who describes the village shop of his late Victorian childhood:

I used to hear tales of grocers mixing sand with brown sugar; but I never saw, or believed, that this was one of Mr Hutchins’ tricks. However, I did see him expanding a giant jar of Health Salts or Magnesia by mixing in sherbert...I rate the Hutchins godly folk in spite of those trading tricks with the sherbert and the like.⁵⁷

⁵³ Rossetti, C., ‘Goblin Market’, in *Goblin Market, The Prince’s Progress, and Other Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), ll.71-76, ll. 321, ll. 474.

⁵⁴ Stern recognises that fresh fruit was rarely dangerous but highlights the dangers of potted fruits, Stern, “‘Adulterations Detected’”, 488, 492-4.

⁵⁵ Rossetti, ‘Goblin Market’, ll. 553-56.

⁵⁶ Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, 72. Useful examples include: Riddell, Mrs J.H., ‘Where we Live’, *The Illustrated Review*, 1, 106 (January 1874), 3; Hallett, C.M., ‘Out of the World’, *The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Members of the English Church*, 3, 18 (June 1882), 532; Anon, ‘Aunt Jane’s Nieces’, *The Quiver*, 61 (January 1889), 824.

⁵⁷ Mosdell, J., ‘Ghosts of Grocery-Hutchins: Memories of a Unique Sussex Village Store of Late Victorian and Early Edwardian Times’, *The Local Historian*, 9, 3 (1970), 128-9.

Mosdell's admission that he had heard 'tales' of adulteration suggests that accounts of dishonest retail practices were repeated often enough to have become rumour and he admits that he had even witnessed it himself. However, his appraisal appears rather tempered by the reflective and nostalgic process which was not the case for Syd Tyrrell, who, as previously mentioned, recalled Raymond Gostick's willingness to cheat his own sister. Although admitting that he was unsure how much of the rumour was true, Tyrrell claimed of Gostick that 'sharp practices were in his blood, for years before his father had been fined £1 at Brackley Petty Sessions for putting too much alum in the bread'.⁵⁸ Tyrrell claims that Gostick 'set out to make money while the going was good' and in response to demands for a white loaf, 'bought an inferior flour and whitened it with alum...it was no secret, everyone in the village knew what was taking place and my brother-in-law worked for him as a baker at the time'.⁵⁹

Such evidence appears to validate the cultural image and yet there would have been practical problems to operating in this way as shopkeepers needed to engender trust, particularly in close-knit rural communities. It is therefore significant that, whilst Tyrrell's recollections are damning, Gostick's reputation does not appear to have affected his custom. Whilst most of his customers were agricultural labourers, he also continued to serve the most eminent man in the village, Mr Tom Wilkinson Holland Esq., a brewer who leased Eydon Hall, the seat of Viscount Valentia.⁶⁰ Such loyalty of patronage was also evident in Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire where John Gibbard Esq., a member of the rural lesser gentry, was a substantial patron of many of the village shops and was not deterred from using local bakers after they were convicted and fined in July 1824 for using alum.⁶¹ This indicates that rural consumers were unconcerned about this type of adulteration; indeed, some of those committed to reform, such as the emerging co-operative societies, encountered resistance from the consumer, particularly the working classes who often preferred the taste and lower price of tainted goods.⁶² So, it was not necessarily the adulteration

⁵⁸ Tyrrell, *Syd Tyrrell's Eydon*, 102. The adding of alum to flour to give it a white appearance was one of the most common adulteration practices, although it was a fraud on the pocket rather than a danger to health.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Holland, or those purchasing on his behalf, would have walked past at least one other baker in the village in order to buy bread at Gostick's shop although it is possible that it was delivered. 'Compilation of Holland family history and analysis of retail geography of the village' by Eydon Historical Research Group (hereafter EHRG); NRO: N79, account book of Raymond Gostick's shop in Eydon (1893-94).

⁶¹ BLA: Quarter Session Rolls (hereafter QSR) 1824/239. For more information on the Gibbard family's consumption habits and relationship with rural and urban retailers see: Bailey, 'Maintaining Status'; Bailey, 'Consumption and Status', Bailey, 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food'.

⁶² A report published in 1856 revealed that the members of one society, which had been set up to provide an unadulterated product, were 'displeased' with the darker appearance of the bread and reverted to adding alum, *Select Committee of Adulteration of Food* etc, (P.P. 1856, VIII), 3rd report,

itself which caused alarm amongst local rural consumers, running contrary to wider urban perceptions, but rumours or evidence of actual deception. Being deliberately dishonest with your neighbours was the primary issue as the overt use of adulterants such as alum might merely reflect local demand.

Dishonesty, deliberate profiteering and the misleading of customers were not the only accusations thrown at the village shopkeeper. Their business practices were also targeted, emphasis placed on their perceived ignorance and incompetency and as poor business practices could be dangerous, an awareness of them was deemed to be in the public interest. A perception grew that both rural retailer and rural consumer were rather ignorant of the dangers of storing, selling and purchasing various commonly required chemicals and medicines and that legislation was required to regulate their sale. This links to the characterisation of the shopkeeper as an ‘automaton’ with ‘no brains’. In 1850 Dickens’ *Household Words* published a short article entitled ‘Poison sold here!’ which emphasises the ease with which arsenic could be procured in village shops, one grocer showing a lack of caution when dispensing it with other groceries to a young girl:

The girl jumbled them all into her apron, and went her way. “Perhaps,” remarked our friend, “some of those ingredients are for a pudding.” “Loikely,” answered the huxter, with a strong Derbyshire accent. “And should the blue paper burst, or a little mistake be made by the cook, the whole family will be poisoned.” “They should moind what they’re at.”⁶³

As Dickens’s purpose in setting up his journal, he admitted to Elizabeth Gaskell, was ‘the raising up of those that are down, and the general improvement of our social condition’, it is clear that the author of this particular piece was following this ethos in attempting to highlight the peril which the ignorant rural consumer was perceived to be in.⁶⁴ It was a condescending urban middle-class perspective on rural retailing as the villager shopkeeper and his rural customers are portrayed as rather simple, ignorant and in need of protection from supposedly enlightened urban observers whose ‘knowledge’ is likely to have come from the various published reports of accidental poisonings by village shopkeepers, particularly of children who had died.⁶⁵ An article published in *The Leeds Mercury* in 1864, for example, lambasts the ‘gross carelessness’ of village

379, in Kassim, L., ‘The Co-operative Movement and Food Adulteration in the Nineteenth Century’, *Manchester Region History Review*, 15 (2001), 11.

⁶³ Anon, ‘Poison Sold Here!’, *Household Words*, 2, 33 (9th November 1850), 156.

⁶⁴ Letter from Charles Dickens to Elizabeth Gaskell dated 31st January 1850. Dickens, C., [Dickens, M., and Hogarth, G. (eds.)], *The Letters of Charles Dickens in Two Volumes: Volume One 1833-1856* (London, 1880), 217, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/25852 (date accessed: 01/11/13).

⁶⁵ For example: Anon, ‘Miscellaneous’, *The Leader*, 7, 320 (10th May 1856), 441; Anon, ‘Postscript’, *The Leader*, 7, 341 (4th October 1856), 946.

shopkeepers who are described as ‘death-spreaders’.⁶⁶ The exposure of such incidents in widely read urban newspapers is likely to have influenced perceptions, taking little account of the fact that the vast majority of village shopkeepers were not poisoning their customers.

The village shopkeeper, Hardy Woolley, certainly objected to this characterisation, suggesting that legislative interference would result in higher prices and great inconvenience for rural communities as ‘a great variety [and quantity] of drugs and chemical preparations are consumed in the management of stock, and the cultivation of land’ and the poor would be forced to go to the nearest town to purchase laudanum for tooth ache or wounds.⁶⁷ However, he does suggest that some interference might be needed to limit the sale of drugs to just ‘one or two respectable shopkeepers in any populous neighbourhood’ to avoid anyone being able to sell them, particularly those who ‘cannot even read a plain English label’ thus making a distinction between competent and incompetent retailers.⁶⁸ He also goes on to argue that even those shopkeepers who were well educated in the storage and sale of drugs could not prevent ignorance causing tragedy and therefore should not be held accountable:

I remember once after trying all my persuasive powers in vain to prevent an old lady from taking a quarter of a pound of No.4 shot, for the purpose of administering to her husband; I told her a person had died after taking such a dose; upon which she with the greatest composure said she would only take two ounces then!⁶⁹

It serves as a reminder that it was not just the shopkeeper that should take an element of responsibility in handling such goods.

A condescending tone is also apparent in material which characterises the business methods of the village shopkeeper as neglectful rather than dangerous. The village shopkeeper is accused of being incompetent, lazy, disorganised and a poor bookkeeper and the village shop is variously described as dark, dingy, dusty, greasy, neglected and cramped, giving the impression of age and decay, the clutter of a cacophony of goods omitting a strong odour. In this regard, many writers sought to evoke the senses of their target audience in order to elicit an appropriate emotional response, the wealth of examples demonstrating the emergence of a sensory theme.⁷⁰ Specific

⁶⁶ Anon, ‘The Sale of Poisons’, *The Leeds Mercury*, 8244 (13th September 1864), 2. These concerns were also reflected in fiction; for example, a story entitled ‘Out of the World’, describes the move from town to country of a middle-class woman, Hester Fairfax, who encounters the rather suspect retail practices of the village shopkeeper, ‘Liger’ who mixed medicines to sell to customers without any idea of what he was doing, Hallett, ‘Out of the World’, 531.

⁶⁷ H.UU., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 25-6.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 26-7.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷⁰ For example: Kar, I., ‘Jue’s Puzzle’, *The Children’s Treasury and Advocate of the Homeless and Destitute*, 18 (1st May 1875), 207; Anon, ‘The Village Shop’, *The Quiver*, 13, 629 (January 1878), 319; Anon, “‘I Promised Father’: A True Story of a Village Girl”, *The Girl’s Own Paper*, 2, 40 (2nd

references to the neglected state of the village shop often described the poor quality of goods, particularly in the shop window. One of the earliest examples was by the rural poet and novelist, Thomas Miller, in *The Boy's Spring Book*, published in 1847, who sketched the village shop as a place where everything is 'well-seasoned, and very little that is fresh':⁷¹

...the dirty handful of sugar that is thrown in one corner of the window...the two or three wizened oranges, which have lain undisturbed for weeks on their bed of comfortable dust in the corner...a wax-doll, whose nose and lips the sun has melted away...a half-quartern loaf, overhung by half a pound of candles, on both of which the effects of the hot sunshine are visible; two or three eggs which have been kept long enough, and made warm enough to contain little chickens...[and] the dirty-looking lard.⁷²

The image conjured for the reader of a jumble of poor quality or old goods is followed by a description of the shopkeepers' inability to find anything:

If you venture inside and ask for anything, no matter what it is, they have it; but bless me! wherever can it be? it must be somewhere in one of these drawers...Couldn't you look in again in about an hour, or call next day? they should be sure to find them.⁷³

It is hard not to think of the old proverb, 'jack of all trades, master of none'. As Miller readily admits that his book set out to recount 'what I did, what I saw, and what I thought, when I was a country-boy', his characterisation of the early Victorian village shop seems rooted in reminiscences of his own childhood yet, crucially, it was also influenced by his perspective as an adult.⁷⁴ To his young readers it may have invoked feelings of familiarity or influenced perceptions of what a village shop was like and whilst Miller wrote from the perspective of an insider to the rural experience, he was also just another middle-class writer satirising and patronising working

October 1880), 2; Marshall, E., 'Hurly-Burly', *Our Darlings*, 110 (December 1890), 47; Overton, E.E., 'The Schoolmistress of Haven's End', *The Leisure Hour* (June 1898), 481. Various other examples of both fiction and non-fiction describe the account book, slate, bills or papers used by the shopkeeper as greasy. For example: Anon, 'The Weston Tragedy', *Dublin University Magazine*, 80, 477 (September 1872), 303; Chilton, E., 'A Labourer and his Hire', *Longmans Magazine*, 25, 145 (November 1894). Further analysis was provided in Bailey, L.A., 'An Assault on the Senses: Cultural Representations of the Victorian Village Shop', paper given at CHORD annual conference (5th September 2013).

⁷¹ The private writings of Jane Austen and the public writings of Mary Mitford, two popular early nineteenth-century authors also alluded to the inferior quality of village shop goods. Austen, J., [Le Faye, D. (ed.)], *Jane Austen's Letters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 16-17; Mitford, M.R., *Our Village: Sketches of Rural Character and Scenery* (Elibron, 2005, originally published 1825), 6.

⁷² Miller, T., *The Boy's Spring Book* (London, 1847), 109-11.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 111-12.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, vi.

or lower-middle class rural types. Indeed, it belittles the villager to suggest that they were incapable of appraising the shop in this way or buying goods elsewhere.

Criticism of the strong odour of the village shop is most usefully demonstrated using the serialised story of Mrs Flint, published in *Court and Lady's Magazine* in 1840, which opened the chapter. The character of 'Mad Matthews', a veteran soldier, while sitting waiting to be served in Mrs Flint's shop, lit his pipe and 'sat quietly whiffing away at the "fragrant weed", no bad antidote against the surrounding compound effluvia of cheese, candles, peppermint, and poverty'.⁷⁵ This powerful description indicates to the reader that the odour was unpleasant enough to require an 'antidote'. Significantly, it was a smell which was made up of more than just the odour of foodstuffs. The suggested stink of 'poverty' would have been likely to conjure images for the magazine's elite female readers of 'the great unwashed', the purpose of the piece to expose their supposed exploitation and elicit some sympathy.

The village shop was also widely depicted as cluttered and cramped, well illustrated by a humorous illustrated short story about two artists visiting the country to paint scenery which was published later in the century in the influential and popular weekly art newspaper, *The Graphic* (Figure 3.6). Recounting an unfruitful trip to a village shop, the narrator, Stodge, describes how his friend's search for hosiery led to him declare "There is nothing in this shop" yet Stodge did not agree, declaring 'I thought there was too much, my unlucky skull having just come into contact with a bucket hung from the roof'.⁷⁶ Considering the newspaper's influence in the art world, this piece may well have been aiming to amuse those artists who regularly withdrew to the country to paint and, perhaps, to strike a chord with their own experiences of rural shops. It certainly hints at a disparity between the constructed image of a rural idyll, being produced at that time by various artists for a mass audience, and the rather grittier reality of the practicalities of everyday rural life as they might have experienced it whilst painting. It may also reflect a desire to stereotype the countryside as innately inferior to the town. Just such a shop appears in the writings of Reverend Richard Cobbold of Wortham in Suffolk, who kept a written and visual record of his parishioners in 1860. He describes Mr Thurlow's small general shop near the village workhouse as 'a very small closet of a Shop, into which two large persons could hardly be so accommodated as to be able to turn about therein'.⁷⁷ Collectively, this sensory imagery sought to convince what was essentially a bourgeois target audience that a visit to a village shop was an unpleasant experience.

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that this sort of multifarious general shop, or *omnium gatherum*, provided the roots of the cultural image, dominating representations of the

⁷⁵ Domino, 'Matthews', 406. See also: Overton, 'The Schoolmistress', 480-1.

⁷⁶ Anon, 'Stodge and Scumble's Country Adventures', *The Graphic*, (27th June 1885), 19, 26.

⁷⁷ Fletcher, R. (ed.), *The Biography of a Victorian Village: Richard Cobbold's account of Wortham, Suffolk 1860* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1977), 106.



Fig. 3.6 Engraving of a village shop and post office. Unknown artist. Source: Anon, 'Stodge and Scumble's Country Adventures', *The Graphic*, (27th June 1885). © Illustrated London News Ltd/Mary Evans

village shop throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. This reflects growth in general retailing, particularly in urban areas, which has been widely recognised (see Chapter 1). Its dominance was undoubtedly influenced by the work of the popular author, Mary Russell Mitford, who produced a series of literary sketches for *The Lady's Magazine* in the 1820s and 1830s, collectively entitled *Our Village*. She declared her village shop to be: 'like other village shops, multi-farious as a bazaar; a repository for bread, shoes, tea, cheese, tape, ribands, and bacon; for everything, in short, except the one particular thing which you happen to want at the moment and will be sure not to find'.⁷⁸ Whilst her reference to bazaars might be a complementary comparison to what was essentially an interesting modern form of retailing at that time, she is clearly being critical about the shop's ability to cater for the needs of middle-class consumers like

⁷⁸ Mitford, *Our Village*, 6.

herself. Testament to Mitford's widespread popularity, which ensured this image was familiar within literate circles, particularly amongst the urban and metropolitan literati whose knowledge of urban shops of quality would have enabled them to empathise with Mitford's plight, this mildly critical image was subsequently spoofed by other writers such as Thomas Hood and Beatrix Potter.⁷⁹ The fact that it was created by one popular writer and perpetuated by another eighty years later attests to the pervasive nature of the image. In the intervening period a wealth of material was published in a wide variety of literature which presented the multifarious stock of the village shop as a spectacle. It was certainly a well-established stereotype by the end of the century, a cartoon which appeared in *Punch* magazine in 1911 (Figure 3.7) representative of a wide range of examples (see Chapter 5).

Whilst it was a matter of opinion as to whether a shop was cluttered, depending to a large extent on the size of the shop, there is widespread evidence of its multifarious nature. For example, writing in the 1970s of his late Victorian childhood, Jack Mosdell described 'Hutchins' village shop in Willingdon in Sussex as the 'Caves of Aladdin'.⁸⁰ A number of studies have also established that there was considerable diversity in the stock of village retailers which often went beyond the remit of the primary trade (see Chapter 1). The diary of the eighteenth-century Sussex village shopkeeper, Thomas Turner, reveals that he offered a wide range of goods and services to his local community which stretched beyond his trade as a mercer.⁸¹ In the nineteenth century, Hardy Woolley's trade hints include an assumption that a grocer in a rural community would need to be multifarious:

Literally a Grocer is one who sells plants, herbs, and spices, practically the word has a more general meaning...in small towns and villages we find written up "Grocer and Draper", "Grocer and Druggist", "Grocer and Ironmonger", "Grocer and Bookseller", and these terms include well nigh every human requirement.⁸²

⁷⁹ See: Potter, B., *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* (London: Penguin, 2002, originally published 1909), 8; Hood, T., 'Our Village by a Villager', in Rossetti, W.M. (ed.), *The Poetical Works of Thomas Hood* (New York, c.1880), www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/15652 (date accessed: 15/08/13). The date that the poem was originally written or published has not been determined but it would predate Hood's death in 1845.

⁸⁰ Mosdell, 'Ghosts', 127. See also: Rose, W., *Good Neighbours* (Bideford: Green Books, 1988, originally published 1942), 51-53.

⁸¹ The original editors of his diary defined his role as 'grocer, draper, haberdasher, hatter, clothier, druggist, ironmonger, stationer, glover, undertaker and what not' and he has more recently been described as a 'jack of all trades...who supplied virtually every retail item to a small community'. Blencowe, R.W., and Lower, M.A., 'Extracts from the Diary of a Sussex Tradesman, a hundred years ago', *Sussex Archaeological Collections*, XI (1859), 183 as quoted in Turner, T., [Vaisey, D. (ed.)], *The Diary of a Village Shopkeeper 1754-1765* (London: The Folio Society, 1998), xv.

⁸² Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 22.

He provides ‘a list of articles most likely to be enquired for at a general shop’, which includes groceries, drapery items, stationery and drugs.⁸³ He also urges his readers to recognise the off-putting appearance of a jumbled shop:

...hanging shutters, and broken windows, with a little of everything thrown therein in confusion, have an abominable if not a suspicious appearance. The interior should appear at a glance, neat and well stocked; it is a very difficult matter to keep a village shop in order, on account of the great variety of goods stored therein; however avoid what the Lincolnshire labourers call “*a mang*”, that is, articles thrown together in such a manner as to cause the head-ache to any person looking upon them.⁸⁴

Yet, as the cultural imagery appears to indicate, many shopkeepers may have found it challenging to balance the need to stock a large range of stock with a desire to retain order.



Fig. 3.7 Cartoon entitled “Speeding Up” in our Village’. Arthur Wallis Mills. Source: *Punch, or the London Charivari* (19th April 1911), 291.

⁸³ H.U.U., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 46.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

An analysis of the credit ledgers of three village shops, George Hooper's bakery in Windrush in Gloucestershire, Rebecca Course's bakery in Tingewick in Buckinghamshire, and Charles Small's grocery and butchery in Great Chart in Kent, emphasises the wide range of stock which would have been kept in the village shop during the first half of the nineteenth century as they offered 243 different types of stock or service between them.⁸⁵ George Hooper offered at least fifty, which not only included bakery goods but also meat, cheese, eggs, various groceries as well as candles and soap.⁸⁶ Rebecca Course had three times as many, at least 156, which, in addition to those types offered by Hooper, included tea, coffee and tobacco; fruit and vegetables; drapery and haberdashery; clothing and shoes; household cleaning products, brushes, brooms and pots; tableware; gunpowder and shot; candles and even manure.⁸⁷ The stock suggests that in addition to her primary occupation as a baker she may have had a particular propensity towards drapery, haberdashery and clothing which she may have had some expertise in. Charles Small offered an even bigger range at his grocery shop, at least 166, which included less clothing, drapery or haberdashery than Course but a far greater choice of types and cuts of meat, reflecting his primary role as a butcher.⁸⁸ His shop also stocked baskets, beehives, books, clogs, coal and he offered various services including the mending of baskets, mangling of clothes and the killing of livestock. This wide variety was by no means the totality of what may have been on offer as the credit ledgers merely reveal what was actually purchased. This is highlighted by the rector, J.B. Burne, who wrote of the 'dead stock' which accumulated over time as shopkeepers attempted to ensure readiness for any request.⁸⁹ The slow movement of some stock was an age-old complaint by shopkeepers, the problem indicated in George Hooper's ledgers as the ten most frequently purchased items by his regular credit customers made up 96 percent of all their purchases therefore suggesting that the numerous other stock items were bought infrequently.⁹⁰

⁸⁵ The figure is a minimum for a range of reasons: it only represents the range of items sold to credit customers, various entries merely state 'goods' or 'drapery goods' and a small number of items were indecipherable.

⁸⁶ GAR: D1522/2/6-7, credit ledgers of George Hooper of Windrush, 1848-54.

⁸⁷ CBS: Q/DA/96/3, credit ledger of Rebecca Course of Tingewick, 1838-40.

⁸⁸ KHLC: Q/CI/296/10-13, credit ledgers of Charles Small of Great Chart, 1834-42. Although an 1839 trade directory and the 1841 census list him as a grocer, the former also lists him under 'butchers'. Whilst impossible to confirm, it is likely that it was his wife, Frances, who ran the grocery side of the business. Census of England: Kent: Great Chart (1841); *Pigot and Co.'s Royal National and Commercial Directory and Topography of the Counties of Bedford, Cambridge, Essex, Herts, Huntingdon, Kent, Middlesex, Norfolk, Suffolk, Surrey and Sussex* (J. Pigot and Co., 1839), 241-2.

⁸⁹ Burne, J.B., *Parson and Peasant: Some Chapters of their Natural History* (London, 1891), 143.

⁹⁰ GAR: D1522/2/6-7. A 'regular' customer is defined as an individual for whom a full year of custom can be identified from within the period covered by the ledgers (1848-54), which was subsequently analysed. Sixty-nine such 'regular' customers were identified from a total of 156. These sixty-nine 'regular' customers made 6676 purchases between them in the particular year relevant to each, 6439 relating to loaves, flour, bacon, cheese, baking of loaves, cakes, bran, salt, dough and lard (96%).

Clearly, the stock of a village shop could go well beyond the remit of the shopkeeper's primary trade into the realms of general retailing. Yet it is important to acknowledge that the relative significance of this varied. In the first half of the century, whilst shopkeepers like Rebecca Course were clearly more of a general retailer, there were certainly those whose primary trade remained significant. The importance of Charles Small's role as a butcher, for example, is reflected in the range of meat offered at his shop as well as the fact that his ledgers usually listed such purchases separately, a number of customers only purchasing meat.

Having established that the nineteenth-century village shop was likely to have been somewhat multifarious, thereby validating its dominance within the cultural imagery, it follows that there may have been some truth in the portrayal of the sensory experience of the rural shopper. A wide range of stock could be a problem as well as an asset, the multitude of goods having the potential to impact significantly on the available space and light in the shop and may well have resulted in a long shelf life and therefore to aged goods and the potential accumulation of dust.⁹¹ Moreover, stock which was open to the air, such as bacon flitches, candles and cheese, were able to mix into a form of olfactory soup which would have been unique to each shop due to variations in stock. It is therefore perfectly conceivable that visitors to a village shop may have found it to be very much like it was described in contemporary literature, at least in terms of the sensory experience. Ultimately, it has to be conceded that the rural shopping experience depended to a large extent on the business practices of individual shopkeepers which, of course, could vary greatly.

Overall, there is a strong indication that the business practices of village shopkeepers were perceived as fraudulent and neglectful by various writers, their use of descriptive language conjuring vivid mental images for their readers which would have stimulated their sensory imagination. Seemingly rooted in the poor reputation of trade forged in the early modern period, which aligned the rural shop with its urban counterparts, such critical, constructed representations were particularly prominent in material aimed at an urban middling and elite readership and strongly suggested that the village shop was a retailer which should be resorted to only where absolutely necessary. This was clearly misleading as it has already been demonstrated elsewhere that the higher class of consumer, such as the rural gentry, could be regular and substantial patrons of village shops.⁹² It therefore forms part of a general condescension towards the rural as urban writers wrote superciliously about the rural shopping experience, often adopting a condescending tone which reflected the sensibilities of their target audience. The shop is clearly portrayed as that of the poor; indeed, most of the goods cited as contributing to the offensive odour were essentially the necessities of the working class: cheese, bacon, candles, soap

⁹¹ The sluggish movement of goods in general village shops is referred to in: Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 219; Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 58-9.

⁹² For example see: Bailey, 'Consumption and Status'; Bailey, 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food'.

and herrings; even the stench of ‘poverty’ was theirs. Therefore, whilst there is undoubtedly some indication that the rural shopping experience may have lived up to its poor reputation, it remained an overtly subjective viewpoint. There was essentially a disparity between the way in which shopkeepers viewed the service which they provided and wider sentiment, which, for the most part, judged the selling techniques of retailers to be cunning and sly and the retailer as someone whose skill lay in ruse and deceit. After all, as Cox and Dannehl have suggested, what were viewed as ‘trickeries of trade’ may well have been retailers’ attempts to modernise and innovate.⁹³ What this misses, of course, is the viewpoint of the shopper who patronised such shops.

Evidence of the experience of the rural consumer, which most usefully emerges in memoirs, combined with evidence of shopkeepers’ awareness of negative stereotyping and their desire to counter its effects, serves to demonstrate that perspective is the key to understanding the significance of this material. The rural consumer, used to frequenting the humble village shop, was far more likely to have accepted the experience as normality and may even have considered it more attractive than a visit to urban shops, particularly when the role of the shop as a social centre is taken into account (see Chapter 4). Moreover, whilst the urban observer declared the rustic consumer to be ignorant, naive and in danger of being exploited or poisoned, they proved themselves to be perfectly capable consumers, able to make their own decisions about what they considered adulteration and to police rogue retailers using gossip and the influence of local religious authority, as Syd Tyrrell’s memoirs reveal. Significantly, whilst such recollections corroborate some of the criticisms made within the literature, there is often an absence of an overtly negative tone. Those recalling their visits to the village shop often looked back on their experiences with fondness, although their recollections are typically drawn from childhood and are seemingly influenced by nostalgia (see Chapter 5). Due to the absence of the contemporary opinion of the rural consumer, which has not been found, rather little can be established of their experience which is not coloured by the reflective process. However, by turning attention to a specific element of the negative imagery, namely literature motivated by an affinity with social reform, which specifically aimed to criticise village shopkeepers for their perceived role in exploiting the impoverished rustic consumer, it is possible to assess the experience of the rural consumer in a little more detail and, crucially, to assess the fairness of specific accusations aimed at village shopkeepers in context.

Casting blame on the ‘exploitative’ village shopkeeper: high prices, monopoly and the burden of debt

By the mid-nineteenth century Britain had been transformed, both in terms of the structure of the economy and the distribution of population, into an urban, industrial country, a fundamental

⁹³ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 187.

and ultimately irreversible shift away from its traditionally rural and agricultural roots.⁹⁴ Yet, as Raymond Williams reminds us, ‘the crisis of poverty, which was so marked in towns and villages alike in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries...cannot be explained as the fall of one order and the institution of another’.⁹⁵ In many ways, taking regional differences into account, change was a matter of interpretation and there was certainly a great deal of debate on the working-class standard of living.⁹⁶ According to Burchardt it ‘has been one of the longest-running, most bitterly contested and most extensively researched questions of modern British history’.⁹⁷

The plight of the agricultural labourer and his perpetual struggle formed an integral part of social and political debate, conflict and reform in various contexts from the late eighteenth century, motivated by a desire to understand the working-class-consciousness. As Solkin suggests, ‘faced with a chronically restive plebeian sub-culture, from the 1790s onwards the British governing classes orchestrated a wide range of efforts to find out more about the “character and condition” of the “common people”, to organise data on a systematic basis and to act, where possible, on its implications’.⁹⁸ The process of enclosing the land, for example, invoked intense scrutiny. Whilst there were regional variations in the experiences of rural communities and various contemporaries commented on what they saw as a north-south divide, the process led in general to a decrease in independence and self-sufficiency for the rural poor, rendering many reliant upon waged employment and increasing their dependence on shops and the vagaries of a market economy. George Sturt, a writer of rural affairs, retrospectively observed that ‘it was like knocking the keystone out of an arch...the old thrift – the peasant thrift – which the people understood thoroughly had to be abandoned in favour of a modern thrift – commercial thrift – which they understood but vaguely’.⁹⁹ This emphasises the apparent vulnerability of the rural working class as consumers in their community, exacerbated by the effects of the Corn Laws which kept the price of bread high. Indeed, Burnett has suggested that

⁹⁴ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 16.

⁹⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 98.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 99. For a discussion on regional differences see Howkins, A., ‘The English Farm Labourer in the Nineteenth Century: Farm, Family and Community’ in Short, *The English Rural Community*, pp.85-104.

⁹⁷ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 20.

⁹⁸ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 4. For more information on social investigation see: Freeman, M.D., ‘Social Investigation in Rural England, 1870-1914’, Doctoral thesis (University of Glasgow, 1999); Freeman, M.D., *Social Investigation and Rural England 1870-1914* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011); Gazeley, I., and Verdon, N., ‘The First Poverty Line? Davies’ and Eden’s Investigation of Rural Poverty in the Late 18th-century England’, *Explorations in Economic History*, 51 (2014), pp.94-108.

⁹⁹ Sturt, G., *Change in the Village* (London: Caliban, 1984, originally published 1912), 86-7. Sturt describes the effects of enclosure on the self-sufficiency of labourers in his village, particularly in chapter nine.

the labourer's standard of life was 'probably at its lowest point immediately before the opening of the Victorian age', particularly in the south where wages were particularly low.¹⁰⁰

This increasing dependence on shops invited scrutiny of the shopkeeper in any consideration of the standard of living of the rural poor. Anxieties about rural retailing were therefore explicitly linked to national questions about the poor and the land and specifically to interest in improving working-class living standards. This links to a more general critique of the poor for 'wasting' their money on luxury imported groceries such as sugar, tobacco and tea which began in the preceding century, many elite observers openly criticising them for what were seen as imprudent purchases.¹⁰¹ As De Vries has stated, 'the consumer behaviours that had been developing since well before the Industrial Revolution were viewed by elite observers with concern and even horror'.¹⁰² The increasingly commonplace use of the constructed stereotype of 'Hodge', which emphasised the agricultural labourer's 'degeneracy and ignorance' and characterised rural life and communities as slow, backward and ignorant, is a reflection of the paternal and, at times, supercilious tone which much of this literature took.¹⁰³ With London the centre of the publishing industry, the audience for much of the literature was also metropolitan and the 'Hodge' label, as Freeman suggests, 'emphasised the cultural distance that lay between the reader of books, pamphlets and articles on rural life and the rustics about whom he read'.¹⁰⁴

Concern for the rural poor often focused on wages, poor relief and, in debates on standards of living, included condemnation of the village shop, particularly in terms of the access to credit which they provided. The inconsistent and irregular payment of wages led many workers towards what contemporary critics argued was an 'improvident' use of credit at shops and away from ready-money purchases from local markets, fairs and itinerant traders.¹⁰⁵ The targeting of rural

¹⁰⁰ Burnett, J., 'Country Diet' in Mingay, *The Victorian Countryside: Volume 2*, 555-6.

¹⁰¹ See Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 43. Cox also suggests that moral anxieties about the dangers of luxury formed one of three strands of thinking which might explain the negative press and low esteem which shopkeepers were subject to in early-modern England: Cox, 'Beggary of the Nation', 26.

¹⁰² De Vries, *The Industrious Revolution*, 186.

¹⁰³ It was a label that applied to the labourer of the agricultural south of England, 'where wages were lower, the rural community more fragile and the social separation of employer and employee more complete'. Freeman, M., 'The Agricultural Labourer and the 'Hodge' Stereotype, c.1850-1914', *The Agricultural History Review*, 49, 2 (2001), 172, 174.

¹⁰⁴ Freeman, 'The Agricultural Labourer', 175.

¹⁰⁵ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 152, 156. This does not mean to suggest that the rural working class did not also continue to utilise urban markets, fairs and itinerant traders, it is their relative reliance on shops and credit which is suggested to have increased. However, more recently Mitchell has suggested that Mui and Mui underestimated the importance of markets and that they continued to be important in the early nineteenth century, Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 163. There was also a notable geographical divide in the distribution of shops which had an effect on this, the southern and eastern counties being better served than the north and west. For more information see: Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 263; Stobart, *Spend, Spend, Spend!*, 78.

shopkeepers in this way may well have been a means of deflecting criticism of the low and irregular wages being paid to agricultural workers.

So, whilst some criticism was directed at the rural consumer for the choices which they made, much of it fell on the village shopkeeper who was accused of exploitation, particularly against the agricultural labourer.¹⁰⁶ It was a topical matter as despite the transformative rise of urban and industrial England, agriculture still provided the largest single occupational group at mid century. This is reflected in an analysis of the census records of the three rural parishes of Great Chart, Tingewick and Windrush (Table 3.1). Notably, when agricultural labourers are combined with households categorised as ‘other labouring and service’ and ‘paupers’, altogether referred to as the ‘rural poor’, it is clear that they represent the majority of the households in each parish. Unsurprisingly, this is mirrored in the credit ledgers of Charles Small, Rebecca Course and George Hooper, which show that the rural poor were the most numerous credit customers drawn from the parish (Table 3.2).¹⁰⁷ This correlates with Mui and Mui’s findings in relation to the eighteenth-century shopkeeper, William Wood of Didsbury, who ‘catered almost exclusively to the labourers’.¹⁰⁸ When the whole customer base is considered, which therefore includes customers from outside the parish, the significance of the agricultural labourer becomes even more apparent (Table 3.3). All three shopkeepers counted agricultural labourers as their most numerous group of credit customers and collectively the rural poor made up between about a third and a half of such customers.¹⁰⁹ This evidence reflects Hardy Woolley’s reminder to his readers, presumed to be those interested in rural retailing, that ‘you are appealing to plain plodding people’.¹¹⁰

The last quarter of the eighteenth century and the first of the nineteenth were marked by legislative and other efforts to improve the condition of the poor and to encourage thrift.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁶ For example, The ‘Earl of Winchilsea’ raised the plight of the agricultural labourer in Parliament in 1830, drawing attention to the association of the village shop with the exploitative truck system. Anon, ‘House Of Lords, Tuesday, Nov. 2’, *The Times*, 14374 (3rd November 1830), 3. See also: Anon, “Protection to British Agriculture”, *The Morning Chronicle*, 23774 (6th January 1846), 5.

¹⁰⁷ Note: Charles Small dealt with relatively fewer of the rural poor and far more farmers, which not only reflects the higher proportion of farmers within Great Chart compared to the other parishes but also his occupation as a butcher as there is evidence of reciprocal trade. KHLIC: Q/CI/ 296/10-13.

¹⁰⁸ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 216.

¹⁰⁹ The figures are a minimum as more may have dealt in cash and therefore do not appear in the ledgers and a proportion of the unidentified customers may relate to this occupational category. For figures in relation to the ratios of cash to credit sales in the early Victorian period see Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 175.

¹¹⁰ H.U.U., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 13.

¹¹¹ For example, the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor published reports in the 1790s, the first Friendly Societies Act was passed in 1793 and the first Savings Bank Act in 1817.

Table 3.1 Parish family units of three villages by occupation

Occupation	Great Chart, Kent (1841)		Tingewick, Bucks (1841)		Windrush, Gloucs (1851)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agricultural labourers	84	46	98	38	39	54
Other labouring/service	18	10	25	10	2	3
Paupers	0	0	20	8	2	3
Total rural poor	102	56	143	55	43	60
Tradesmen and craftsmen	23	13	64	25	21	29
Farmers	24	13	19	7	4	6
Elite, gentry & clergymen	2	1	0	0	2	3
Public service & professional	2	1	5	2	0	0
Independent	14	8	13	5	1	1
<i>Miscellaneous/ unknown</i>	14	8	16	6	1	1
Total remainder	79	44	117	45	29	40
Total parish family units	181	100	260	100	72	100

Note: ‘Agricultural labourers’ also includes labourers (specified and unspecified) and other agricultural occupations (e.g. shepherd, gamekeeper, gardener, sawyer, carter, drover, woodman); ‘Other labouring/service’ includes domestic and unspecified servants and other non-agricultural labouring occupations (e.g. stone miner, road labourer, railway worker, bricklayer); ‘Farmers’ includes land stewards, bailiffs and graziers; ‘Independent’ includes annuitants, pensioners and ‘living on means’.

Source: Census of England: Kent: Great Chart (1841); Bucks: Tingewick (1841); Gloucs: Windrush (1851).

Table 3.2 Parish family units as customers of three village shops by occupation

Occupation	CHARLES SMALL Great Chart (1834-42)				REBECCA COURSE Tingewick (1838-40)				GEORGE HOOPER Windrush (1848-54)			
	PFU (1841)	PFUC			PFU (1841)	PFUC			PFU (1851)	PFUC		
		No.	as % of PFU	as % of PFUC		No.	as % of PFU	as % of PFUC		No.	as % of PFU	as % of PFUC
Agricultural labourers	84	19	23	30	98	36	37	52	39	25	64	50
Other labouring/service	18	2	11	3	25	3	12	4	2	1	50	2
Paupers	0	0	n/a	n/a	20	5	25	7	2	1	50	2
Total rural poor	102	21	21	33	143	44	33	63	43	27	63	54
Tradesmen and craftsmen	22	9	41	14	63	17	27	24	20	18	90	36
Farmers	24	20	83	32	19	4	21	6	4	3	75	6
Elite, gentry & clergymen	2	1	50	2	1	1	100	1	2	2	100	4
Public service & professional	2	0	n/a	n/a	5	1	20	1	0	0	n/a	n/a
Independent	14	4	29	6	13	0	0	0	1	0	n/a	n/a
<i>Miscellaneous/ unknown</i>	14	0	0	n/a	15	1	7	1	1	0	n/a	n/a
<i>Impossible to tell</i>	n/a	8	n/a	13	n/a	2	n/a	3	n/a	0	n/a	n/a
Total remainder	78	42	54	67	117	26	23	37	28	23	82	46
Totals	180	63	35	100	259	70	29	100	71	50	70	100

Note: See Table 3.1 above. Figures exclude the shopkeeper in each case and therefore the total number of tradesmen and craftsmen and the total number of parish family units is one less for each village than shown in Table 3.1. ‘PFU’ (parish family units); ‘PFUC’ (parish family unit customers).

Source: CBS: Q/DA/96/3; KHLC: Q/CI/ 296/10-13; GAr: D1522/2/6-7; Census of England: Kent: Great Chart (1841); Bucks: Tingewick (1841); Gloucs: Windrush (1851).

Table 3.3 Customer base of three village shops by occupation

Occupation	CHARLES SMALL Great Chart (1834-42)		REBECCA COURSE Tingewick (1838-40)		GEORGE HOOPER Windrush (1848-54)	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Agricultural labourers	34	29.8	61	37.7	72	46.2
Other labouring/service	2	1.8	6	3.7	4	2.6
Paupers	0	0.0	4	2.5	1	0.6
Total rural poor	36	31.6	71	43.9	77	49.4
Tradesmen and craftsmen	15	13.2	31	19.1	30	19.2
Farmers	28	24.6	8	5.0	8	5.1
Elite, gentry & clergymen	3	2.6	1	0.6	2	1.3
Public service & professional	1	0.9	1	0.6	2	1.3
Independent	3	2.6	2	1.2	1	<0.7
<i>None given or cannot decipher</i>	3	2.6	2	1.2	1	<0.7
Total remainder	53	46.5	45	27.7	44	28.2
Total identified	89	78.1	116	71.6	121	77.6
<i>Unidentified</i>	25	21.9	46	28.4	35	22.4
Total customers	114	100.0	162	100.0	156	100.0

Note: See Table 3.1 above. Figures include all customers listed in the ledgers (inside and outside each parish). Any customers for whom an occupation could not be identified are categorised accordingly to the occupation of the head of the household. There are 167 customers listed in Rebecca Course's ledger but five of these relate to old outstanding debt and therefore are not active customers during the period analysed.

Source: CBS: Q/DA/96/3; KHLC: Q/CI/ 296/10-13; GAR: D1522/2/6-7; Census of England: Kent: Great Chart (1841); Bucks: Tingewick (1841); Gloucs: Windrush (1851).

As part of this process, due to their increased role in serving the rural poor, the village shopkeeper appears to have been identified as a key player in exacerbating rather than easing financial hardship in rural communities, one of the prominent accusations being the high prices which they charged.¹¹² William Cobbett, for example, detailed his thoughts and opinions on what he witnessed of the agricultural labourer's life in *Rural Rides*, first published in serial form in the 1820s in his weekly newspaper, *Political Register*, which was popular with the working class.¹¹³ He expressed sympathy for their plight, specifically criticising the circumstances which increased their reliance on village shops and the ability of rural shopkeepers to charge high prices:

I have often had to observe on the cruel effects of the suppression of markets and fairs, and on the consequent power of extortion possessed by the country shop-keepers. And what a thing it is to reflect on, that these shopkeepers...make them pay any price that they choose to extort.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Accusations of high prices at rural shops have been noted by scholars but not investigated further. For example see Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 78, 175.

¹¹³ It has since been suggested that 'there is no finer account of the degradation of the labourer'. Fay, C.R., *Life and Labour in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 84.

¹¹⁴ Cobbett, W., *Rural Rides* (London: Penguin, 1985, originally published 1830), 500.

His use of language is emotive, the words ‘cruel’, ‘power’ and ‘extortion’ providing a strong sense of injustice which focuses on the perceived role of the shopkeeper in consciously exploiting the rural poor. This is also reflected in the expressive language used in the tale of the ‘vampyre’, Mrs Flint, which opened the chapter, the villainous character being an allegorical representation of the author’s social and moral opinions. Mrs Flint, whose name suggests ‘skin-flint’, is portrayed as grasping, the extent of her fortune explicitly linked to the extortion of her poverty-stricken customers:

The poor simple folk opened their eyes in astonishment at what they esteemed the prodigious *mine* of riches accumulated by the widow and her late father, forgetting that it had all been drawn from the impoverished *veins* of *their* fathers and themselves.¹¹⁵

Again there is this metaphorical hint at the bloodsucking nature of the shopkeeper, insinuating that it was rural working-class families, those who they relied on for the majority of their trade, who contributed to the shopkeeper’s ‘hoarded accumulations’ through the high prices paid.¹¹⁶

Cobbett was by no means the only critic who provided fuel for such fiction. The *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, published in 1843, detailed widespread complaints about profiteering:

A general conviction prevails that the charges of village shops are exceedingly high...In some places the shops are represented as 25 per cent. dearer than the town shops; in others as 20, in others as 10 per cent. dearer; in all, the articles as inferior; and in most, the practice of giving credit used as a means of exaction.¹¹⁷

It is significant that the reporter declares the high charges to be ‘a general conviction’ and utilises the evidence from interviews to support this. Rev T. Harvey, Rector of Cowden in Kent, for example, claimed that the agricultural labourer was ‘confined to the limits of his little circle and perhaps only late on the Saturday evening receiving his wages, his dealings are solely with the village shop’, the high prices due to a ‘want of competition’.¹¹⁸ Some blame for their predicament is therefore suggested to lie with the employer and yet this is glossed over using the example of an employer near Maidstone who claimed to have switched payment of his workers to the

¹¹⁵ Domino, ‘Matthews’, 414.

¹¹⁶ It is worth noting that several critics have read the much later novel, *Dracula* (1897), as a comment on Victorian capitalism as a blood-sucking system. Sadly, a lack of evidence prevents any useful analysis on the wealth of rural shopkeepers.

¹¹⁷ BPP, *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners on the Employment of Women and Children in Agriculture*, PP XII, [510] (1843), 140-1. It also claimed that the truck system, which is more readily associated with industries such as collieries, railway construction and nail-making, was in operation in agricultural areas. For more information on truck see: Hilton, G.W., ‘The British Truck System in the Nineteenth Century’, *Journal of Political Economy*, 65, 3 (1957), pp.237-256.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 211.

morning in order that they could go to the 'better and cheaper shops' in the market town.¹¹⁹ Whilst useful in demonstrating widespread negative opinion on the village shop amongst the governing classes, the report uses what Freeman has described as the 'informant' approach' and therefore fails to grasp the opinion of either the agricultural labourer or the village shopkeeper and remains an elite observation.¹²⁰ This problem is also noted by Reay who states that 'the famous surveys of rural life are, almost without exception, views from the top down, heavily weighted in favour of the opinions of employers and clergy rather than the workers themselves'.¹²¹

An article entitled 'The Village Shop', published in the 1½d weekly, *Chambers's Journal*, which specifically aimed to champion the plight of the rural poor, thus appealing to the sensibilities of its working-class readership, claimed that the scale of the price hikes was even greater. The author uses the 'Hodge' stereotype, represented in the article by the characters of 'Giles the carter, or Roger the ploughman' and their respective wives who, it is suggested, gave more to Mrs Jones, the shopkeeper, for their groceries than their 'betters'; Mrs Giles is described as being 'compelled by poverty, ignorance, and lack of choice...to buy produce in the dearest [market]'.¹²² The high prices are blamed on the need for such customers to buy in small quantities at a time, suggested to be pennyworth or farthing portions:

We have to maintain the tradesman who is willing to keep stock for us; his shop is, in fact, the reservoir when we draw our supplies by instalments, and we pay him from twenty-five to two hundred per cent for the accommodation he thus affords us.¹²³

These claims were refuted by Hardy Woolley who suggested that the article was inflammatory and misleading and that rural prices were actually akin to urban prices:

In writing of this sort much is put down for effect, and the discerning reader will hardly be misled thereby; our friend Giles of these days is not such a simpleton as he is here made to appear...and the leading articles of the grocery trade are sold at nearly a level rate of profit

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

¹²⁰ Freeman, 'Social Investigation', abstract; Freeman, *Social Investigation*. Freeman has identified 'a conflict between the 'informant' approach (where trustworthy authorities were asked to comment on the condition of the agricultural labourer) and the 'respondent' approach (where the labourer was consulted at first hand)' in relation to social investigations of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. He noted important differences in outcome dependent on the perspective and methods used and the preconceptions of the investigators.

¹²¹ Reay, *Rural England*, 6.

¹²² Anon, 'The Village Shop', *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 398 (17th August 1861), 98.

¹²³ Ibid., 97.

in all parts of the country; the remotest villages are now in effects as the suburbs of large towns.¹²⁴

By declaring that Giles is ‘not such a simpleton as he is here made to appear’, Woolley directly criticises the condescending tone of the article’s author.

The widespread accusations of high prices and Woolley’s counterclaim about the profit margins of grocers can be tested. Firstly, the prices charged by Thomas Grindon, a grocer in the village of Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire, can be compared to those of Robert Wilkin Robinson, a grocer in the local market town of Bedford, approximately nine miles south (Table 3.4).¹²⁵ It is immediately apparent that the urban shop offered a far wider range of certain types of goods demonstrating that those who were able to access urban shops could make choices about quality and price. Some of the items, such as raisins, currants and mustard, were clearly the same price although there was a penny a pound on the price of rice (17%). However, these are unlikely to have been bought frequently by the rural poor. More relevant are the prices charged for staples, an unspecified type of cheese being half a penny per pound (5%) more expensive at the village shop and moist sugar having the same premium on its price (7%). There was up to one and a half pence per pound on loaf sugar (13%), the pricing appearing to correlate with the quantity bought, although this was a premium product.¹²⁶ This suggestion that the purchase of larger quantities could secure a discount hints at the disadvantage that the rural poor were subject to as consumers, particularly those living a hand-to-mouth existence. Whilst in theory some may have been able to negotiate the purchase of larger quantities on credit, it is unlikely that they would have had the room or suitable conditions to store the excess for gradual consumption. A browse of virtually any village shop ledger demonstrates that the rural poor typically preferred to purchase only what they needed, necessitating frequent trips to the shop.¹²⁷

Whilst this evidence corroborates the claims of higher prices at the village shop, it also demonstrates that they varied from item to item. As Alexander has suggested, ‘margins varied among trades as well as within them’.¹²⁸ Notably, the markup was generally below or within the 10 to 25 percent claimed in the 1843 report by the Poor Law Commissioners.¹²⁹ It is also important to consider the necessity of a profit margin as rural retailers would not have been able

¹²⁴ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 27-28.

¹²⁵ There is no evidence of prices varying during the year and Grindon offered a shorter credit period (one month) compared to Robinson (six months) therefore these have been excluded as factors which might account for the higher prices at the village shop.

¹²⁶ For example: Grindon charged 12d or 13d a lb for 1-3lbs of loaf sugar but he only charged 11.5d when 12lbs 2oz was bought in February and 20lbs in July. BLA: Garrard & Allen archive (hereafter GA): 18.

¹²⁷ See Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 212-4; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 141.

¹²⁸ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 171.

¹²⁹ BPP, *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners*, 140-1.

Table 3.4 Comparison of 1828 grocery prices of Thomas Grindon, Sharnbrook (village) and Robert Wilkin Robinson, Bedford (market town), Bedfordshire

Grocery item	Type	Village (Grindon)	Town (Robinson)
		Price per lb	Price per lb
cheese	<i>unspecified</i>	10d	9.5d
	Cheshire	<i>n/a</i>	11d
	Dutch	<i>n/a</i>	6-7d
	Leicester	<i>n/a</i>	8-9d
currants	<i>unspecified</i>	13d	13d
mustard	<i>unspecified</i>	2s	2s
raisins	<i>unspecified</i>	8d	8d
	Elma	<i>n/a</i>	9d
	Muscatelle	<i>n/a</i>	12-18d
	Turkey	<i>n/a</i>	7d
	Valencia	<i>n/a</i>	9d
rice	<i>unspecified</i>	7d	<i>n/a</i>
	Carolina	<i>n/a</i>	6d
	ground	<i>n/a</i>	8d
sugar	<i>unspecified</i>	<i>n/a</i>	7d
	moist	7.5d	7d
	loaf	11.5-13d	11.5d

Source: BLA: GA18-19, bills sent to John Gibbard Esq. of Sharnbrook Bedfordshire.

to make a living without putting a reasonable premium on their stock to reflect the more limited trade of a rural community, the convenience that they provided and their need to cover the cost of transporting their stock from wholesalers. It is therefore the relative percentage of this markup on goods which may have deserved derision rather than the prices themselves as retailers who had unusually high mark-ups might justifiably have been accused of greed.

Evidence of the profit margins of village retailers is rare although there is some useful evidence which demonstrates that they also varied. Some rural retailers had slim profit margins and were barely able to make a living. For example, in 1801 a village shopkeeper in Berkshire cut his margins ‘very finely’ and ‘the business barely met its costs’, the profit margin varying greatly by item with some, like flax tape, providing a return, whilst others like cheese and sugar were retailed at cost price or below ‘to cover the break of the scale’.¹³⁰ Other village shopkeepers were clearly able to turn a useful profit. The Sharnbrook grocer, Thomas Grindon, for example, had a profit margin of two pence per pound on the butter he sold (17-20% markup).¹³¹ Edward Allnatt, a grocer in Sonning in Berkshire, put a similar premium on goods, making the most profit on

¹³⁰ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 170-1.

¹³¹ BLA: GA18, GA20. Figures are taken from Grindon’s bills to John Gibbard of November and December 1828. Grindon’s bills reveal that he bought the Gibbard family’s surplus butter, the price paid in late 1828 varying between ten and twelve pence per pound, possibly due to differences in quality or demand, which may have involved some haggling over price. This was compared to the price which John Gibbard then paid for butter, presumably bought due to fluctuations in the availability of home produce, which was typically between twelve and fourteen pence, thus revealing the grocer’s two pence profit margin.

cocoa (Table 3.5). This compares to the gross profit margins of urban retailers which Alexander has suggested were between 5.5 and 10 percent.¹³² Whilst some of Allnatt's prices fell within the 25 to 200 percent suggested in the article in *Chambers's Journal*, they are at the modest end of the scale indicating that the article may have been rather inflammatory. As Hardy Woolley suggests, in presenting the worst-case scenario it was most likely done 'for effect' and would have contributed to the creation of a misleading impression of widespread profiteering.¹³³ More problematic for the rural poor would have been unpredictable market changes in price which often dramatically affected the price of necessities and made budgeting difficult. The price of a loaf of bread at George Hooper's bakery, for example, went up by three pence during 1853 as the price of wheat rose.¹³⁴ This is also noted by Burnett who states that 'the movement of prices throughout the century was of intimate concern to the working classes, raising or depressing standards of life from one year to another, often from one month to the next'.¹³⁵

Village shopkeepers' perceptions of the hardship of their trade also serves to contradict the characterisation of the village shopkeeper as grasping. Many felt that they did not live well on their trade, extracting a very modest income. James Hurnard's memoirs, for example, reveal the difficulties his father faced in raising a young family whilst running a village shop in Boreham, Essex during the Napoleonic wars, when prices were high:

He was continually in want of money, and this kept him in a state of mental trepidation and anxiety lest demands should be made upon him which he would be unable to meet. I have often heard him say that he used sometimes to envy the day labourers who passed his door, exempt, as they appeared, from the cares which surrounded him.¹³⁶

Clearly it was not just the agricultural labourer who found it hard to remain solvent. A poem entitled 'The Situation of Richard Gardiner' by Richard Gardner, 'Poet of the Teme' and keeper of a general village shop in Clifton upon Teme in Worcestershire, emphasises this point.¹³⁷ The implied modesty of Gardner's lifestyle is echoed in the autobiography of a Scottish village draper who claims he had 'not become a rich man', had lived with 'a horror of bankruptcy' and could not afford to retire as he calculated his stock-in-trade 'which embraces all my wealth' to be just

¹³² Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 169.

¹³³ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 28.

¹³⁴ GAR: D1522/2/7; Burnett, J., *A History of the Cost of Living* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 206-7. Market changes affecting prices at the village shop has also been noted by Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 215.

¹³⁵ Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living*, 205.

¹³⁶ Hurnard, J., *A Memoir* (London, 1883), 14-15.

¹³⁷ Gardner, R., 'The Situation of Richard Gardiner' in Gardner, R., *Poems by Richard Gardner: The Poet of the Teme* (Worcester and London, 1825), Part 3, 15. The spelling of 'Gardiner' in the title of the poem differs slightly from the poet's surname which may or may not be deliberate.

Table 3.5 Profit margin on selected goods sold by Edward Allnatt, grocer, in Sonning, Berkshire (1863-75)

Item	Type or brand	Cost price listed	Selling price	Profit margin	Markup (%)
Cocoa	Nibs	1s per lb	1s 4d per lb	4d per lb	33
	Epps	1s 0.5d per lb	1s 4d per lb	3.5d per lb	28
	Cocoatina	1s 3d per quarter tin	1s 6d per quarter tin	3d per quarter tin	20
Potted meats	n/a	10d per tin	1s per tin	2d per tin	20
Sardines	n/a	10.5d per tin	1s per tin	1.5d per tin	14
Sugar	Loaf	3.75d per lb	4.5d per lb	0.75d per lb	20
	Demerara	3.5d per lb	4d per lb	0.5d per lb	14
Matches	Bryant & Mays	2s 9d per gross	3s 6d per gross	9d per gross	27
	Safety	7s 6d per gross	9d per dozen [9s per gross]	1s 6d per gross	20
Candles	Nightlights	4s 9d per dozen	5s 6d per dozen	9d per dozen	16
	Tallow	4s 10d per dozen	5s 6d per dozen	8d per dozen	14
	Composite	7s per dozen	8s 6d per dozen	1s 6d per dozen	21
	Economic	7s 6d per dozen	8s per dozen	6d per dozen	7
	Spermacetti: Belmont	8s 9d per dozen	10s per dozen	1s 3d per dozen	14
	Spermacetti: Gold Medal	10s per dozen	11s per dozen	1s per dozen	10
	Stearine	10s 6d per dozen	11s per dozen	6d per dozen	5
	Spermacetti: Chamber	11s 6d per dozen	12s per dozen	6d per dozen	4

Source: MERL: D86/7, Account book of 'village stores' in Sonning, Berkshire, 1863-75.

£500.¹³⁸ So, whilst he admitted to a comfortable livelihood he also knew 'something of the difficulty of making things meet and button'.¹³⁹ Such evidence counters suggestions that the shopkeeper grew rich by exploiting the rural poor; indeed, village shopkeeping could be extremely modest in scale, providing the bare minimum to survive. For example, in Lowick, Northumberland, Jane Forster, the respectable widow of a local relieving officer, who was left destitute with three young children when her husband and eldest daughter died of cholera, was set up in a small village shop by Edward Henderson, a local landowner. He 'raised a subscription amongst the friends of her late husband sufficient to purchase the fixtures for this small shop' and then 'with two other friends became bond for her to a person to supply her with goods'.¹⁴⁰ The modesty of her income is demonstrated by his letter to the Poor Law Guardians on her behalf, which argued against the reduction in her allowance which her new living had generated:

To show you how impossible we think it is for her live upon three shillings per week, two friends, an old aunt of her late husbands who has barely sufficient to live upon herself, and a Brother to her late husband, a colliery agent with a wife and six children, have actually engaged to make up the deficiency to her for a time until you will consider the propriety of restoring her to her former allowance.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Anon, *The History of a Village Shopkeeper*, 177; 185-6.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 185.

¹⁴⁰ The National Archives: Poor Law Correspondence: Northumberland Poor Law Unions: Berwick on Tweed: Copy of a letter from Mr E Henderson of Lowick dated 23rd June 1852: MH 12/8981/299.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

An adjunct to the rhetoric on high prices was a consistent emphasis on the role of the village shop as a retail monopoly, which aligns closely to its characterisation as multifarious. It was often described as *the* shop or the shopkeeper's trade in terms of a monopoly, the aim being to highlight the high prices and exploitation that supposedly resulted from a lack of competition. Mrs Flint, for example, is described as a 'great monopolist', which provides the context for the subsequent storyline.¹⁴² Similarly, the 1861 article published in *Chambers's Journal* begins by using expressive language to claim that the village shop was devoid of competition, a monopoly which limited the options of poorer rural consumers:

The little huckster's shop, the general shop, in fact *the* Shop, is as completely an institution of the genuine English village as the Forge, the Hall, the Parsonage, or the Church. It answers to the Oriental bazaar in being at once...the place where everything can be bought, and where, in default of other marts, everything *must* be bought...What we do not know – most of us, at least – is that the village shop is at once a monopoly and an engine of extortion, a devouring quicksand, that absorbs the small earnings of the poor, and which, like the quicksand, is none the richer for the prey it sucks into its greedy maw.¹⁴³

Mrs Jones is then described as 'the rural monopolist' and a strong impression is given that rural communities were perceived to be a captive market which could be dominated and exploited, at least in terms of the working classes:

Monopoly is never a good thing, and the shop is a monopoly. But then one village would no more support two shops than one sky could contain two suns. There are not, in most cases, enough customers to keep two establishments solvent.¹⁴⁴

This rather sweeping claim suggests that the author was generalising, not only here but throughout the article. Just as he had refuted the claims of high prices, Hardy Woolley also challenged this suggestion that there was no competition in rural communities, declaring that 'the village shop has but a poor chance of holding a monopoly in these times'.¹⁴⁵

It is possible to use trade directories to ascertain the number of retail monopolies in rural areas and therefore test this claim. An analysis of the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent, demonstrates that a relatively small percentage of villages or rural parishes, about a quarter, could reasonably be supposed to have been retail monopolies at mid century (Table 3.6). This demonstrates that the widespread assumption that the village shop was a monopoly does appear to have been somewhat of a misrepresentation. This is even more

¹⁴² Domino, 'Matthews', 404.

¹⁴³ Anon, 'The Village Shop' (*Chambers*, 1861), 97.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

¹⁴⁵ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 27-28.

apparent when it is considered that these figures are a maximum rather than a minimum. As already demonstrated, many shopkeepers traded beyond the remit of their primary occupation as recorded in official records which made them more like general stores, so what might appear to be a local monopoly was not necessarily the case. This is most usefully demonstrated within the context of the local retail landscape of the three villages of Tingewick, Windrush and Great Chart (Table 3.7). Charles Small, for example, sold bread despite the fact that he was listed as a grocer and butcher thereby providing competition for the only baker in Great Chart, who might have been supposed to have enjoyed a monopoly on the sale of bakery goods. Similarly, George Hooper sold a number of non-bakery goods which may have been motivated by a desire to entice his regular customers to do a greater proportion of their purchases in his shop rather than at the grocery shops in the village. It is certainly worth noting Winstanley's assertion that favourable developments in rural retailing 'did not mean that village shops necessarily prospered or that they were local monopolies', most villages having some kind of retail competition.¹⁴⁶

Diversification of trade or stock was a tactic which could be used to increase market share or merely to maintain solvency. After all, a notable percentage of the rural poor in each of the three parishes did not use the shops of Charles Small, Rebecca Course or George Hooper for credit purchases (Table 3.2) suggesting that they were either paying in cash or going elsewhere for their goods.¹⁴⁷ Equally, all three shopkeepers were attracting the custom of agricultural labourers from outside the parish (Figure 3.8).¹⁴⁸ This is particularly apparent for Windrush as George Hooper had twenty-six such customers from the nearby village of Sherborne despite the fact that there was already a baker there. So not only was he serving the majority of labourers in his parish but was also attracting significant custom from a neighbouring village indicating that he had a good reputation locally.

As the rural poor were willing to travel beyond their parish to visit a village shop, competition from retailers in nearby parishes therefore had the potential to dilute the impact of a retail monopoly. The relatively close proximity of each of the three shops to a market town (Table 3.7) is also significant as whilst the rural poor may have had limited opportunities to visit such urban centres and might encounter significant problems in gaining credit at an urban shop, they are likely to have visited markets and fairs. Indeed, Chartres has suggested that even in smaller

¹⁴⁶ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 202. The village of Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire is one such example, numerous retailers trading alongside each other during the early nineteenth century (see Table 4.6 in Chapter 4).

¹⁴⁷ Cash transactions were not normally entered in account books or ledgers and day books rarely identify them as such. There are rare exceptions such as the eighteenth-century grocer, William Wood of Didsbury: Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 141.

¹⁴⁸ This aligns with Fowler's findings in relation to the large catchment area of a village tailor, which included a nearby town. Fowler, 'Robert Mansbridge', 30.

Table 3.6 Number of village shops and retail monopolies in three counties in 1850s

County	Trade Directory	Size (acres)	No. of villages/ rural parishes	No. of village shops	No. of villages/rural parishes by no. of shops								Retail monopolies	
					0	1	2	3	4	5	6-9	10+	No.	%
Bucks	P.O. 1854	472,320	194	798	47	34	14	22	15	9	30	23	42	22
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	805,102	318	1241	56	54	46	31	30	31	43	27	83	26
Kent	P.O. 1855	1,041,479	313	1275	50	46	54	37	21	20	54	31	79	25

Note: All areas defined as urban (e.g. towns, cities and their suburbs) are excluded; all other areas (e.g. hamlets, villages and parishes) are included, regardless of population size. Any hamlets or villages listed under another village, parish or town were not counted separately unless their population and traders were also listed separately. Co-operative ‘stores’ have been included although ‘societies’ have not as they might not have related to retailing. Post offices are included although posting houses, typically associated with hotels and inns, are not. The definition of ‘retail monopoly’ includes all villages where there was only one retailer as well as those where the only other retailer(s) were a totally different trade (e.g. a grocer and a butcher; or a baker and a grocer). Whilst this cannot take account of any retailing of goods beyond the primary trade, which went unrecorded in the trade directories, it does ensure that the definition of monopoly represents a maximum rather than a minimum (also reflected in the fact that those who compiled trade directories could be selective in their listings and therefore such sources often excluded less formal retailers).

Source: *Post Office Directory of Berkshire, Northamptonshire, and Oxfordshire with Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Huntingdonshire* (Kelly and Co., 1854); *Post Office Directory of Essex, Herts, Kent, Middlesex, Surrey and Sussex* (Kelly and Co., 1855); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire, with Bath and Bristol* (Kelly and Co., 1856).

Table 3.7 The retail landscape of three villages in the first half of the nineteenth century

Village	No. of shops	Type of retailer	Nearest market town (miles)	Nearest retail competition		
				Village & distance (miles)	No. of shops	Type of retailer
Great Chart, Kent	3	baker; grocer; grocer & butcher	Ashford (2)	Chilmington Green (2)	0	n/a
				Hothfield (3)	2	grocer (2)
				Kingsnorth (3.5)	1	grocer
Tingewick, Bucks	12	butcher (6); baker (3); shopkeeper & draper (2); grocer	Buckingham (2.75)	Finmere [Oxon] (1.5)	1	baker
				Water Stratford (1.5)	0	n/a
				Radclive (2)	0	n/a
				Gawcott (2)	6	baker (3); butcher; grocer & baker; shopkeeper
				Preston Bissett (3)	5	baker (2); butcher (2); grocer
Windrush, Gloucs ¹⁴⁹	5	baker ; grocer (2); grocer & draper (2)	Burford, Oxon (4)	Little Barrington (1.3)	1	butcher
				Great Barrington (1.5)	3	baker (2); grocer
				Sherborne (1.5)	3	baker; draper; grocer

Note: Rebecca Course (Tingewick), Charles Small (Great Chart) and George Hooper (Windrush) are highlighted in bold.

Source: Census of England: Kent (1841): Great Chart (includes Chilmington Green), Hothfield, Kingsnorth; Bucks (1841): Gawcott, Preston Bissett, Radclive, Tingewick, Water Stratford; Oxon (1841): Finmere; Gloucs (1851): Great Barrington, Sherborne, Windrush (includes Little Barrington); *Pigot and Co.’s Directory of Buckinghamshire* (Pigot & Co., 1830-1); *Pigot and Co.’s Directory* (1839); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856).

¹⁴⁹ The 1851 census for Windrush also lists a butcher but he is unlikely to have had a shop as he lived at his uncle’s farm. There is also a ‘miller, maltster, baker and farmer’ but as she lived at the mill it is unlikely that she had a shop or that bakery was her primary trade. Census of England: Gloucs: Windrush (1851).

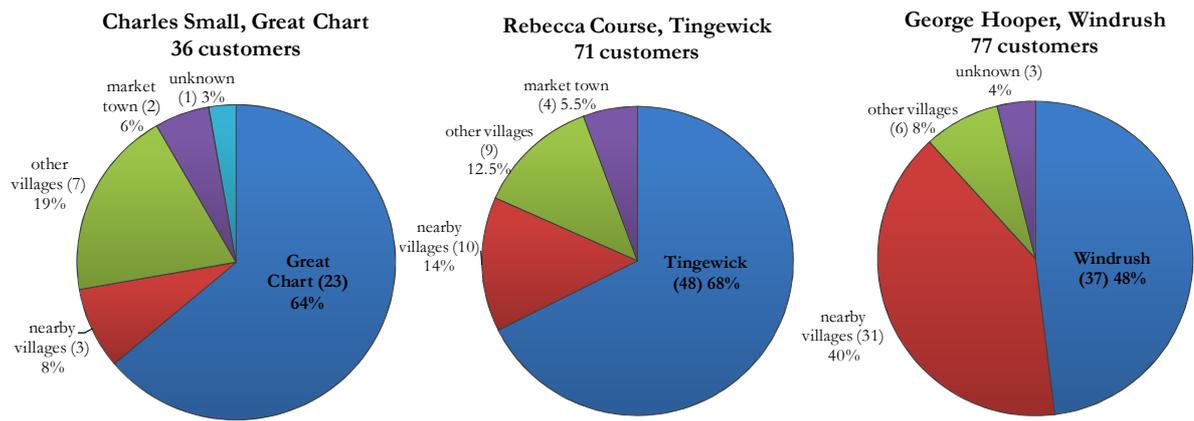


Fig. 3.8 Location of customers (rural poor) for three village shops.¹⁵⁰ Source: CBS: Q/DA/96/3; KHLC: Q/CI/ 296/10-13; GA: D1522/2/6-7.

villages the shops ‘were not by any means monopolists’ due to contacts with market towns via the country carrier as well as the continuing role of itinerants.¹⁵¹ Mary Wade, for example, who grew up on a farm in the late nineteenth century, recalled that the villagers could pay ‘about two or three pence to the carrier to do their shopping’.¹⁵² Furthermore, as the century progressed, urban shopkeepers began to encroach on the rural shopkeeper by providing deliveries of a wider variety of products at lower prices straight to customers’ doors (see Chapter 6). So a retail monopoly in a rural parish did not necessarily preclude the rural poor from shopping elsewhere, which further contradicts the message conveyed in contemporary cultural representations. However, it is important to be cautious in declaring this to be evidence that they were exercising choice in where they shopped as they may have had credit withdrawn locally forcing them to go further afield in search of it.

In addition to accusations of high prices and a retail monopoly, the village shop and its keeper were also accused of exploiting the rural poor using the credit system. They are portrayed as cruel and heartless for deliberately withholding credit for those in desperate need or, more commonly, charged with encumbering the rural poor with debt. The former is found in the story of Mrs Flint, who withholds credit from a poor local lady desperate for a loaf to feed her sick husband and children, but it also appears in a painting produced in 1879 by Thomas Faed, a social realist and successful painter of domestic genre art, entitled ‘From Hand to Mouth: He was one of the

¹⁵⁰ Nearby villages are defined as those within 4 miles of the village.

¹⁵¹ Chartres, ‘Country Tradesmen’, 309.

¹⁵² Wade, M., [Meade, M. (ed.)], *Knighton Grange: Memories of my Childhood on a Lone Farm* (Carlton: Carlton & Chellington Historical Society, 2012), 92.



Fig. 3.9 'From Hand to Mouth'. 1893. Wood engraving. J.M. Johnstone. Produced from an original painting 'From Hand to Mouth - He Was One of the Few Who Would Not Beg' (1879) by Thomas Faed. Source: www.ancestryimages.com.

few who would not beg' (Figure 3.9).¹⁵³ It is one of the only examples of the depiction of the village shop within mainstream art which portrays the theme of social concern which had arisen within Victorian art, 'most dramatically perhaps in the response to Thomas Hood's *The Song of the Shirt* of 1843'.¹⁵⁴ As a genre painting it followed a tradition established in the opening decade of the century which was described by Solkin as 'the new forms of painting daily life', which focused on the life of 'the poor, and more specifically, the rural poor'.¹⁵⁵ Like Ripplingille had done in his paintings of the rural post office, Faed emphasises the contrast between rich and poor, the destitution of the proud veteran and his children who 'would not beg' contrasting with the

¹⁵³ Domino, 'Matthews', 410. Whilst it is not clear from the title of Faed's painting that it depicts a village shop, it is described as such in a contemporary review: Anon, 'Spider Subjects', *The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Members of the English Church*, 30, 179 (November 1880), 515. It followed 'a series of hugely popular paintings on the theme of cottage poverty' which he had produced for the Royal Academy in the 1850s and 1860s therefore it is likely to have been an image that was reasonably well disseminated amongst the middling and elite members of society. Treble, R., 'The Victorian Picture of the Country' in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 55.

¹⁵⁴ Treble, 'The Victorian Picture', 54-5. The only other notable example of a social realist painting of a village shop is Walter Langley's 1884 painting 'Among the Missing' (see Chapter 4).

¹⁵⁵ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 1-2.

opulence of the other family in the shop. Whilst the well-dressed lady is purchasing non-essentials, her wealth and status indicated by her pet dog and black page boy, the man is attempting to purchase the bare essentials to sustain his family, the desperation of their situation emphasised by the misery of the children.¹⁵⁶ No attention is paid to the poor family, except by the shopkeeper who looks intently at the man as he leans towards him. Interestingly, as Hichberger indicates, ‘contemporary reviewers were unable to agree on the outcome of the drama, which rested on the response of the shopkeeper’.¹⁵⁷ One reviewer described ‘a fat grocer’s counter, where there is obviously no disposition to bate a penny’ which appears to reflect the prevailing negative image of the uncharitable village shopkeeper.¹⁵⁸ In contrast, another suggested that ‘the chandler studies the man’s face while prepared to take back the goods; his looks, although indicating suspicion, are not without possibilities of compassion’.¹⁵⁹ As an example of narrative (storytelling) art, which became very popular in its ability to communicate with an uneducated audience, it necessitated an interpretive process which inevitably gave scope for ambiguity.

Far more widespread and explicit than portrayals of the withholding of credit were accusations that the rural poor were being burdened with debt at the village shop. This aligns with Finn’s suggestion that personal debts were traditionally viewed in literary and historical texts as ‘misfortune’ rather than immoral and debtors were considered ‘unfortunate’.¹⁶⁰ Sympathies aligned with the debtor rather than the creditor indicating a hardening of attitudes towards the use of credit. The story of Mrs Flint insinuated that the shopkeeper’s fortune was facilitated by the purchases of poor families who were bound to their local shop by their need to access credit, as well as by the debt that they already owed, and therefore they lacked the ability to exercise choice. The author claimed that not even retail competition provided relief for the labourer ‘because he is harnessed to the “old one”, by the halter of debt’.¹⁶¹ Twenty years later in *Chambers’s Journal* Mrs Jones’ shop ledger is referred to as ‘the Black Book of Fate’, suggesting that many felt a sense of dread at being in debt to the village shopkeeper.¹⁶² The author advocated the founding of ‘co-operating firms’ as a solution, echoing the claims of social reformers at the turn of the century whose initial foray into co-operative retailing in pockets of the agricultural south, part of

¹⁵⁶ Hichberger, J.W.M., *Images of the Army: The Military in British Art, 1815-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988), 150.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ Anon, ‘The Royal Academy’, *The Athenaeum*, 2742 (15th May 1880), 637.

¹⁶⁰ Finn, *The Character of Credit*, 28. See also Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 303-12. It also links with Hoppit’s claim that even enthusiasts of the use of credit ‘admitted that credit could and was exploited desperately, foolishly and criminally’ by certain parties. Hoppit, ‘Attitudes to Credit’, 321.

¹⁶¹ Domino, ‘Matthews’, 404.

¹⁶² Anon, ‘The Village Shop’ (*Chambers*, 1861), 98.

a wider socialist vision, was ultimately unsuccessful.¹⁶³ Hardy Woolley acknowledged the influence which this type of journal could have on popular support for the co-operative store system: ‘until lately [it] has attracted little general attention; now we find such men as Robert Chambers recommending it, we may prepare for a vigorous struggle against its influence’.¹⁶⁴ Indeed, there was considerable support for a ready-money system for working-class customers, many writers believing that co-operative retailing could be a workable solution.¹⁶⁵

Hosgood has suggested that the ability of small shopkeepers to grant credit judiciously and act as bankers for the poor gave them power, their influence over the purse strings of working-class households described as ‘pervasive’.¹⁶⁶ Yet, as with accusations of high prices and a retail monopoly, the contemporary shopkeeper, Hardy Woolley, refuted the claims, citing the *Chambers’s Journal* article as an example of how ‘the friends of Co-operation have rather wide notions of the present system of the grocery trade’ and claiming that ‘the village shop has but a poor chance of...continuing an engine of extortion’.¹⁶⁷ He believed that the country store keeper was a ‘necessity’, particularly to the poor, yet he does acknowledge the problems associated with debt:¹⁶⁸

The country grocer *must* discourage the credit system as far as possible, the tendency of modern legislation is to lessen the power of the creditor over the unfortunate debtor, besides power over such, is of no use; it is a sorry sight to see in mid-winter a string of half

¹⁶³ Ibid., 100. The roots of co-operative retailing in villages stems from a few rural shops which emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century, set up by benevolent individuals in response to the needs of the rural poor, aiming to provide them with necessities at cost price. A village shop founded by the Bishop of Durham in Mongewell, Oxfordshire in 1794 and two set up by Reverend George Glasse in Greenford and Hanwell, Middlesex are generally reported as being the first co-operative shops of their kind. For further information see: *Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition and Increasing the Comforts of the Poor, Vol 1* (London, 1798), 13-20, 58-9; Kaufmann, Rev. M., ‘Social Pioneering: The History and Progress of Co-operation in England’, *The Leisure Hour*, 1456 (22nd November 1879), 749; Anon, [book review] ‘*Self-help a Hundred Years Ago* by George Jacob Holyoake’, *The Athenaeum*, 3173 (18th August 1888), 215-6; Purvis, M., ‘Co-operative Retailing in Britain’ in Benson and Shaw, *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, 111; Turnbull, J., and Southern, J., *More Than Just a Shop: A History of the Co-op in Lancashire* (Preston: Lancashire County Books, 1995), 1.

¹⁶⁴ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 25.

¹⁶⁵ A new movement at a grassroots level was founded in the 1840s by working men in the industrial north on principles of self-help and gradually gained momentum as a vehicle of social reform, rousing interest in its potential as a solution to the perceived burden of debt. A debate raged in the periodical press throughout the 1870s and 1880s between those for and against this new style of retailing. For evidence of the debate see: Lawson, J.H., ‘Co-operative Stores: A Reply to the Shopkeepers’, *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 5, 24 (February 1879), pp.362-7; Lord, T., ‘A Shopkeepers’ View of Co-operative Stores’, *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 5, 26 (April 1879), pp.733-9.

¹⁶⁶ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 441.

¹⁶⁷ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 27-28.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.

starved debtors appearing to county court summonses, to promise to pay what they can never spare, or obtain honestly; the credit system, with this class at least, must be abolished or limited to very small amounts, if all power is taken away from the creditor in these small shops debts, the benefit would be mutual; it must come to this, and the poor in times of distress must and ought to be aided in some other way.¹⁶⁹

So, here is an admission by a village shopkeeper that the rural poor really did feel the burden of debt and advocating the abolition of credit for the poorest customers. Woolley deflects blame away from the shopkeeper and onto the credit system itself in terms of its capacity to draw certain people into debt.

It is possible to assess claims of a burden of debt, the ledgers of George Hooper's shop in Windrush providing useful insights into the debt management of agricultural labourers. He had sixty-nine regular customers, forty-one of whom (59%) were categorised as rural poor (Table 3.8). Roughly in line with their representational percentage, they account for 63 percent of credit taken and 62 percent of payments made; however, they accounted for 73 percent of the total outstanding debt and had the lowest revenue to debt ratio. A notable proportion, fourteen (34%), accounting for a fifth of the regular customers, were poor at managing their credit accounts as they not only had old debt, in some cases rather large amounts, but were also adding to it on an ongoing basis (Table 3.9). For example, Charles Tye senior, a married agricultural labourer from the neighbouring village of Sherborne, had an outstanding debt at the start of 1851 of £28 14 11½, most of which was incurred prior to 1848 and was therefore likely to have accumulated over several years. Despite only purchasing loaves and flour and making regular payments his debt had increased to £34 11 6 by the end of the year, an increase of 20 percent.¹⁷⁰ This debt far exceeded what Cobbett suggested was typical, namely 'on an average, a mortgage on their wages to the amount of five or six weeks'.¹⁷¹ In fact his total debt is likely to have exceeded his yearly income as whilst wages varied considerably throughout the country and from year to year, the average weekly cash wage in 1837 was 10s 4d and in 1851 was just 9s 7d, an annual income of between £24 and £27.¹⁷²

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 28-9.

¹⁷⁰ GAR: D1522/2/6-7. During 1851 Charles Tye senior bought 866 loaves, 10 pecks of flour and on one occasion bought cake.

¹⁷¹ Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 500.

¹⁷² Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living*, 250; Richardson, T.L., 'Agricultural Labourers' Wages and the Cost of Living in Essex, 1790-1840: A Contribution to the Standard of Living Debate' in Holderness, B.A. and Turner, Michael (eds.), *Land, Labour and Agriculture, 1700-1920: Essays for Gordon Mingay* (London: Hambledon, 1991), 90; Philip, *Victorian Village Life*, 75.

Table 3.8 Debt, credit and payments of regular customers (one year) at George Hooper's bakery shop in Windrush, Gloucestershire

Occupation	Regular customers		Outstanding debt		Credit taken		Payments made		Revenue to debt ratio (decimal)
	No.	%	Total (£.s.d.)	%	Total (£.s.d.)	%	Total (£.s.d.)	%	
Agricultural labourers	37	53.6	215 15 5¼	71.0	408 18 11¾	58.2	365 12 8	57.0	1.69
Other labouring/service	3	4.4	4 12 6	1.5	21 4 9½	3.0	21 2 0	3.3	4.6
Paupers	1	1.4	0 3 2	0.1	10 9 1	1.5	10 10 7	1.6	66.5
Total rural poor	41	59.4	220 11 1¼	72.6	440 12 10¼	62.7	397 5 3	61.9	1.8
Tradesmen & craftsmen	15	21.7	52 19 1¼	17.4	162 3 6½	23.1	154 17 4¾	24.2	2.9
Farmers	3	4.4	1 15 8¾	0.6	8 7 7	1.2	7 18 4	1.2	4.4
Elite, gentry & clergymen	1	1.4	11 15 7¾	3.9	1 12 10½	0.2	0 0 0	0.0	0
Total remainder	19	27.5	66 10 5¼	21.9	172 4 0	24.5	162 15 8¾	25.4	2.4
Total identified	60	86.9	287 1 7	94.5	612 16 10¼	87.2	560 0 11¾	87.3	2.0
<i>Unidentified</i>	9	13.1	16 13 1¾	5.5	89 15 9½	12.8	81 10 2½	12.7	4.9
Total customers	69	100.0	303 14 8¾	100.0	702 12 7¾	100.0	641 11 2¼	100.0	2.1

Table 3.9 Debt management of regular customers at George Hooper's bakery shop in Windrush, Gloucestershire

Occupation	Regular customers	Debt management											
		GOOD				STABLE				POOR			
		No.	% (occupation total)	% (total regular custs)	Outstanding debt (£.s.d.)	No.	% (occupation total)	% (total regular custs)	Outstanding debt (£.s.d.)	No.	% (occupation total)	% (total regular custs)	Outstanding debt (£.s.d.)
Agricultural labourers	37	17	46	25	19 11 1	6	16	9	43 18 6¾	14	38	20	152 5 9½
Other labouring/service	3	2	67	3	3 13 10½	1	33	2	0 18 7½	0	0	0	n/a
Paupers	1	1	100	2	0 3 2	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	n/a
Total rural poor	41	20	49	29	23 8 1½	7	17	10	44 17 2¼	14	34	20	152 5 9½
Tradesmen & craftsmen	15	9	60	13	14 2 5¾	4	27	6	12 14 10	2	13	3	26 1 9½
Farmers	3	3	100	4	1 15 8¾	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	n/a
Elite, gentry & clergymen	1	0	0	0	n/a	0	0	0	n/a	1	100	2	11 15 7¾
Total remainder	19	12	63	18	15 18 2½	4	21	6	12 14 10	3	16	4	37 17 5¼
Total identified	60	32	53	47	39 6 4	11	18	16	57 12 0¼	17	28	24	190 3 2¾
<i>Unidentified</i>	9	5	56	7	12 6 1¾	3	33	4	2 4 11½	1	11	2	2 2 0½
Total customers	69	37	54	54	51 12 5¾	14	20	20	59 16 11¾	18	26	26	192 5 3¼

Note (for both tables): A 'regular' customer is defined as an individual for whom a full year of custom can be identified from within the period covered by the ledgers (1848-54), which was subsequently analysed. 'Outstanding debt' is the debt left at the end of the year analysed for each customer. 'Good': customers with no long term debt and an ongoing credit account which was typically paid off in full at intervals; 'Stable': typically had long term debt but were able to keep up with their ongoing credit account; 'Poor': long term debt which was increasing as payments did not cover the ongoing credit taken and/or ceased using the shop leaving an outstanding debt).

Source (for both tables): GAR: D1522/2/6-7.

The inability of some working-class families to manage their debt, even where it is proven that they were only purchasing the bare necessities, hints at causal factors beyond their control, such as the inadequacy of wages, unemployment, underemployment, the sickness or death of a breadwinner or a large number of dependents. Indeed, recent research has shown that rural poverty was influenced by a life-cycle.¹⁷³ Horn has suggested that even where the debt is relatively small, poor customers often struggled to pay it off. In Bletchley in Buckinghamshire, for example, ‘old Robert Jones’ spent 3s. 7½d on a few modest items in July 1881, paying 3s. in cash, and yet the small balance was not paid off until the following September.¹⁷⁴ In Devonshire, an agricultural labourer struggled with irregular payments, resorting to the use of tickets from a local charity to manage his debt.¹⁷⁵ Yet it is worth bearing in mind that such difficulties may also have been due to poor financial decisions or reckless spending elsewhere and therefore the assignment of blame is difficult without such wider evidence.

Whilst it is impossible to ascertain the exact cause of their debt, the extent can be measured, giving an indication of what may have been typical. At George Hooper’s shop the rural poor had a collective outstanding debt of £220 11 ¼ (Table 3.8), £152 5 9½ (69%) of which was accounted for by the fourteen agricultural labourers who were poor at managing their debt (Table 3.9). Yet they represent just a third of the occupational total and 39 percent of the total paid by them.¹⁷⁶ Similarly, they held half of the total outstanding debt of all regular customers whilst representing just a fifth of such customers and a quarter of the total payments made.¹⁷⁷ So, whilst their payments roughly correlated with their representational percentage, their debt was much higher. In fact, as their outstanding debt of over £152 was far more than the combined totals of the twenty-seven other poor families (who had good or stable debt management), these fourteen may well have felt the burden of debt (the corresponding impact that this kind of debt had on the shopkeeper and their efforts to mitigate risk are discussed in Chapter 5). However, these were a distinct minority, the majority of the rural poor having manageable amounts of debt at George Hooper’s shop. Nearly all had debt of under ten pounds although, as Alexander has emphasised, whilst these may be classed as small debts, ‘a debt of £5 to £10 was not small in relation to a

¹⁷³ Gazeley and Verdon, ‘The First Poverty Line?’.

¹⁷⁴ Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 135.

¹⁷⁵ Martin, E.W., *The Shearers and the Shorn: A Study of Life in a Devon Community* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965), 93.

¹⁷⁶ GAR: D1522/2/6-7. The 14 agricultural labourers made payments totalling £153 14 7 which is 39% of the £397 5 3 paid by the rural poor.

¹⁷⁷ Table 3.8 shows that the 69 regular customers had a total outstanding debt of £303 14 8¾ and Table 3.9 shows that the 14 agricultural labourers accounted for £152 5 9½ (50%). They also made payments totalling £153 14 7 which is 24% of the £641 11 2¼ paid by all 69 regular customers.

labourer's ability to settle it'.¹⁷⁸ More noteworthy therefore are the twenty-seven, two-thirds, who had debt of under five pounds, thirteen of which, a third, had debt of under a pound.¹⁷⁹ They represented the ideal customers: regular purchasers who made regular payments to service their accounts.

The majority of the rural poor therefore appear to have been able to manage. Nearly half of George Hooper's poorer customers were good at controlling their credit accounts as they had no long term debt and paid off the balance in full on a regular basis and a further seven, 16 percent, were stable credit customers, typically having some old debt but not adding to it in the longer term (Table 3.9). Significantly, the highest revenue to debt ratio of all George Hooper's customers was actually that of a pauper, Charlotte Hedges, who was excellent at managing her credit account. During 1853 she regularly paid her account off in full, typically never leaving it longer than a month or letting her debt rise higher than £1. As paupers would not typically be considered particularly creditworthy individuals this appears to suggest that she had proven to George Hooper that she was astute in managing her financial affairs and could be trusted.

So it seems that living a hand to mouth existence did not preclude having access to credit if you could be trusted. This appears to go against the 'elementary safeguards' which Alexander suggests were used by some urban shopkeepers such as Abraham Lancaster, a draper at Stratford in Essex, who declared that if he knew a customer was poor he would 'certainly run the chance of losing him' rather than give credit.¹⁸⁰ As such, it is likely that many rural poor valued their status as credit customers as it acted as a badge of respectability. Indeed, credit was a mark of honour and worth, Muldrew's analysis of the cultural currency of credit highlighting the link between character (particularly community reputation) and the granting of credit.¹⁸¹ By building and maintaining a trusting relationship both shopkeeper and customer not only avoided insolvency but might build a friendly rapport which made trips to the shop an enjoyable social experience (see Chapter 4). The relationship was clearly one of mutual reliance, the rural poor accounting for nearly two-thirds of George Hooper's revenue from regular customers, demonstrating that he was likely to have relied on their business to remain solvent.¹⁸² As Mui and Mui have suggested, 'without a regular demand from the agricultural [workers]...such shops could not have functioned'.¹⁸³ This is reflected in shopkeepers' management of their credit accounts, many, like George Hooper, exercising great patience and flexibility in their trading relationship with the rural poor, allowing customers to exchange goods or labour for credit and even

¹⁷⁸ GAR: D1522/2/6-7. Thirty-nine out of forty-one of the rural poor customers had total outstanding debt of under ten pounds (95%). Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 182.

¹⁷⁹ GAR: D1522/2/6-7.

¹⁸⁰ *Recovery of Small Debts* as quoted in Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 183.

¹⁸¹ Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, chapter 6.

¹⁸² Table 3.8 shows total payments of £641 11 2¼, the rural poor accounting for £397 5 3 (62%).

¹⁸³ Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 216.

loaning money, presumably in times of need, all of which involved some risk to the shopkeeper's solvency (see Chapter 5). In reality it was therefore potentially disastrous for a rural shopkeeper to have exploited and been hated by their core customer base.

Conclusion

Print culture undoubtedly played a significant role in creating and perpetuating traditional beliefs about rural retailing. By the mid-nineteenth century the village shopkeeper had a poor reputation, having been typecast as an enemy of the rural poor, which is reflected in the shop being almost entirely overlooked in artistic representations of village scenes. Whilst it is impossible to determine the true influence of such widespread negative imagery on the perceptions of the reader, it is likely that narrative empathy played a significant role in fuelling its perpetuation. Dominated by anxiety over high prices, monopoly and the burden of debt, the developing image of the village shop in the first half of the century and its relationship with the rural working class was one rooted in the governing classes, essentially those who not only had an interest in or debated contemporary socio-economic questions but had the ability to consume, commission or influence literary and visual culture. They considered it to be a necessary evil, blaming retailers for exposing the rural poor to 'temptation' and leading them to impoverishment yet few possible remedies were suggested beyond the setting up of ready-money shops by benevolent individuals. This collective opinion emerges from the conviction that they understood the poor, though absolutely *not vice-versa*.¹⁸⁴

This was a narrow and objective viewpoint which led to a misleading portrayal of the relationship between the rural poor and their local retailers, presenting what was atypical as typical. The focus was on emphasising extremes of behaviour rather than a balanced reality in order to advance a social agenda, the depiction of a worse-case scenario accentuating their claims. Whilst rural retailers charged higher prices for certain goods, there is little truth in the accusations of profiteering, their profit margins appearing to have been what might reasonably be expected to make a living. Provision also has to be made for the difficulties inherent with trading in rural areas, the convenience offered by the willingness of shopkeepers to sell in small quantities and the fact that granting credit was risky. It has also been shown that relatively few village shops would have commanded a retail monopoly in their communities which seriously questions what was a prevalent and almost universally espoused characteristic of rural retailing. Moreover, whilst the rural poor were the most numerous and regular customers at rural shops, it is less certain how reliant they were on any one particular retailer. Cash sales notwithstanding, they were generally

¹⁸⁴ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 2.

not purchasing extravagantly, they exercised some choice in where they shopped, they were not always obliged by their circumstances to purchase in pennyworth portions on credit and whilst many did have some outstanding debt, most were able to manage this successfully. This parallels Stobart's findings in relation to the eighteenth century, the customers of rural shops generally respecting 'the mutuality of the bond between shopkeeper and customer' created by their stake in the local credit economy.¹⁸⁵ Ultimately, a need to maintain a healthy credit account is likely to have kept the majority from reckless behaviour yet this majority are invisible in the cultural record.

The penetration of the topic into the fiction and non-fiction of the shilling monthlies and other literature aimed at the growing middle-class audience reflects its relative importance as a contemporary issue and demonstrates how a carefully constructed and disseminated version of reality can become ingrained within the psyche of wider society. It also highlights the dichotomy between those who saw retailing in abstract economic and political terms and those who viewed retailing through the eyes of a customer or retailer.¹⁸⁶ Seeming to draw on established attitudes towards rural retailers, rather than aloof assessments of the experiences of the rural working-class consumer, literature aimed at the middling sorts focused more closely on the rural shopping experience of the urban middle-class consumer (either visiting or moving to the countryside), deeming it an unsatisfactory assault on the senses and depicting rural retailers as dishonest and incompetent purveyors of poor quality goods. It was essentially an urban perspective which drew on and aimed to appeal to urban sensibilities. Many writers were openly disparaging and even cynical; they satirized and patronised working or lower-middle class rural types, demonstrating the ambivalent class discourses that seem to have informed depictions and discussions of the village shop and rural retailing more generally. Significantly, whilst social anxieties about the influence of the village shop on the plight of the agricultural labourer faded during the late nineteenth century, this negative condescending urban middle-class perspective on the rural shopping experience persisted into the Edwardian period.

Emphasising the misleading nature of the negative stereotype which emerged during the first half of the century is the fact that it took no account of the points of view of the shopkeeper and the rural working-class consumer. This is significant for two reasons. Firstly, whilst there were undoubtedly unscrupulous retailers, by pressing this particular point a false impression of the reality was given which was driven by the suggestion that every poor rural consumer was a victim. Just as there were honest and dishonest shopkeepers so there were good and bad customers. Indeed, it has been widely documented that many poor families faced ruin and starvation due to their ineptitude at managing their income, some spending inordinate amounts at the alehouse or

¹⁸⁵ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 157.

¹⁸⁶ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 22.

in purchasing beer from shops, an issue which helped to fuel the temperance movement.¹⁸⁷ Secondly, the governing classes are unlikely to have had intimate knowledge of the relationships forged between village shopkeepers and their poorer customers and therefore their appraisal of the situation was superficial. Indeed, their motivation may have been to deflect attention away from their own role in the pauperisation of the rural working class through the enclosure of the land. It is certainly necessary to be cautious about viewing the discourse of ‘metropolitan commentators, journalists, politicians and moralists...as representative of consumers in the provinces’.¹⁸⁸ What is lacking is the opinions of the rural poor, who used village shops and knew the shopkeepers, to compare to such literary impressions. Unfortunately they leave virtually no trace of their opinions aside from some childhood reminiscences, which are often heavily influenced by nostalgia (see Chapter 5). Mitchell has recognised this problem, claiming that lower-ranked shoppers of the early nineteenth century are particularly elusive, therefore it is hard to document their behaviour let alone present their attitudes and opinions.¹⁸⁹

The cultural response can be rationalised, to some extent, by placing it within a wider context. Writers and artists in the first half of the nineteenth century were essentially part of a tradition which reflected the well-established pastoral genre and the influence of Romanticism, developing a powerful critique of the conditions produced by industrialisation, which typically compared the town with the country.¹⁹⁰ The business of retailing and the stocking of a range of foreign and manufactured goods linked the village shop to urban and overseas markets, to industrialisation and modernisation as well as to the poor reputation of trade and retailing more generally. In that regard it represented the intrusion of the urban into the rural, many believing that it had no place in Arcadia. Dealing in products symbolic of empire, materialism and industrial advancement, it was considered to be an ‘unnatural’ part of the village, ill-fitting within an agrarian community and a pollutant of the visual aspect of the rural landscape. As such the village shop, it seems, was an easy target for critics, considered unfit to serve either rich or poor when in reality it played a vital role in serving the needs of the rural community.

¹⁸⁷ Other activities such as gambling were also considered a frivolous waste of money. For more information on off-licences and the working-class consumption of alcohol see: Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 452-3.

¹⁸⁸ Stobart et al., *Spaces of Consumption*, 160.

¹⁸⁹ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 180.

¹⁹⁰ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 26, 33.

‘The place is a news agency’: The village shop as a centre of sociability

In 1911 Arnold Bennett published his reminiscences of a move to ‘the country’ in the periodical, *English Review*, in which he confesses that his knowledge of the village shop was gleaned from ‘novels’ and that he had even ventured to describe it in fiction of his own.¹ Recalling his eventual encounter with a rural retailer, he found the shop was apparently much as the fiction he had read describes: ‘I was equally surprised and delighted to find that the village-shop of fiction was also the village-shop of fact...the proprietor, who had never seen me before, instantly knew me and all about me’.² Bennett was suggesting that the village shopkeeper, both of fiction and fact, was *informed*, a central figure in the community who received, held and distributed local news and gossip.

By focusing on the social significance of the shop and its keeper within the life of the nineteenth-century village community, this chapter helps to broaden our understanding of the history of rural retailing beyond the commercial. Recent analyses of retail space have recognised the shop as an important cultural space in the eighteenth and nineteenth century which had social as well as economic significance.³ As has been suggested, ‘customers came to buy and to talk, to inform and be informed; and the shopkeeper acted as host to these various processes. Both were active agents of social and spatial change’.⁴ In urban areas shopping developed as a leisure pursuit and retailers endeavoured to exploit this by creating pleasurable shopping environments, particularly those targeting a higher class of customer, their shops suggested to have been ‘social mixing pots’ due to the drawing together of town and country people in space

¹ Bennett, A., ‘Watling Street: A Memory’, *English Review*, 9 (Sept 1911), 217. Bennett was a very successful and well-known author who had a significant influence in politics and culture.

² Ibid.

³ Walsh has shown how urban retailers created enticing shopping environments and highlights the gendering of shop space; Morgan has analysed urban consumer space; Stobart et al have drawn attention to space and spatial practices, particularly in relation to shops in provincial urban towns and their role in polite urban space; Stobart has also looked at the commercial use of domestic space and the use of shop space by eighteenth-century grocers. Walsh, ‘Shop Design’; Walsh, C., ‘Social Meaning and Social Space in the Shopping Galleries of Early-modern London’ in Benson and Ugolini, *A Nation of Shopkeepers*, pp.52-79; Walsh, ‘Shops, Shopping’; Morgan, ‘Producing Consumer Space’; Hann and Stobart, ‘Sites of Consumption’; Stobart et al., *Spaces of Consumption*; Stobart, J., ‘Accommodating the Shop: The Commercial Use of Domestic Space in English Provincial Towns, c.1660-1740’, *Citta e Storia*, II, 2 (2008), pp.351-63; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, particularly chapter 5.

⁴ Stobart et al., *Spaces of Consumption*, 158.

and time.⁵ The smaller, more modest shopkeepers, who depended heavily on local custom, needed to invest in the social life of their community in order to succeed, Hosgood demonstrating that those serving the urban working class were well integrated and dynamically involved in the culture of their community, their shops ‘a social as well as economic nexus’.⁶ Rather less is known about the role of the rural shop as a social space or the sociability of the village shopkeeper, although the diaries of Roger Lowe and Thomas Turner provide some evidence for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁷ This chapter bridges the gap between such evidence from the early modern period and modern-day perceptions of the village shopkeeper as a figure at the heart of the community by providing clarity on the situation in the nineteenth century.

It has already been shown in the previous chapter that village shops were patronized by a broad cross-section of rural society, making them just as much of a social mixing pot as those in urban areas. Yet, if the village shopkeeper catered for a broad clientele, how did they fit into their community? Were they well integrated, as Stobart has demonstrated of craftsmen-retailers and producer-retailers, or were they ‘condemned to social isolation’ as Winstanley suggests?⁸ The following analysis is an attempt to answer these questions within the context of the wider cultural image of the village shop.

The first section explores the ways in which the village shop was portrayed as a centre of sociability in literary and visual culture, and how this can be linked with evidence of consumer engagement. This includes the emerging image of the rural Post Office, the creation of a national postal service having required the setting up of a system of sub-post offices.⁹ These were sometimes located within inns, but most formed part of the function of village shops. In what follows, then, the post office is considered part of the broader category of village shop. The rest of the chapter is concerned with testing the validity of a gender distinction within literary representations of the sociability of the shopkeeper. The second section therefore focuses on establishing the roots of the predominantly negative image of the gossipy female shopkeeper and the use of the shop by local female gossip networks. As will be shown, the postmistress and post

⁵ Ibid., 141.

⁶ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 439, 447.

⁷ Turner, *The Diary of a Village Shopkeeper*; Lowe, R., [Sachse, W.L. (ed.)], *The Diary of Roger Lowe of Ashton-in-Makerfield, Lancashire 1663-74* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938).

⁸ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 213; Stobart, ‘The Economic and Social Worlds’; Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’.

⁹ The first informal receiving houses began to emerge in villages after the establishment of a general penny post in the 1760s although it was not until the nineteenth century that the Post Office began to take responsibility for rural deliveries and official Penny Posts became widespread, particularly after the introduction of the Uniform Penny Post in 1840. Rudd, J. and Rudd, S., *A Village Post Office* (Twyford and Ruscombe: Twyford & Ruscombe Local History Society, 1990), 40-2.

office dominated the imagery, reflecting their capacity to act as filters for information going into and out of the village, the validity of this gender bias being tested by using evidence from trade directories. In the last section attention turns to the male shopkeeper who was typically portrayed more favourably as a trusted and respected member of the community who might be relied upon for his sound advice and intellectual conversation. This is tested using an assessment of their place and role in the rural community, particularly the structure and significance of their connections and their involvement in local governance. Establishing the nature and extent of localised personal networks exposes how bonds of patronage, friendship and kin might have influenced the nature of interaction conducted within the shop space. Gaining an insight into the use of the rural shop as a social space in the nineteenth century, along with greater clarity on the place and influence of the shopkeeper within village life, enriches our understanding of the history of rural life and community.

The village shop as a social centre

Throughout the nineteenth century the village shop, particularly the post office, was portrayed in literary and visual culture as a social as well as a commercial centre, a source of local, regional and national news and information. The shop window was significant in this regard as it was not just used to display tempting wares, which were suggested to provide a topic for conversation, particularly amongst children (see Chapter 5), but also hosted advertisements and notices. For example, in ‘Letters to Jack Cornstalk’, published in *The Argosy* in February 1901, the celebrated Australian author, Henry Lawson, writing about his residence in England, describes the notices in his local post office window and its relation to local news and gossip: ‘You can read the domestic and business troubles of the village between the lines of these advertisements. Villagers study that window with interest – it is their newspaper’.¹⁰ The rural shop was also portrayed as a place to which strangers or visitors might apply for information on lodgings, local amenities or to enquire after somebody. For example, in a story called ‘A Message from the Sea’, published in Charles Dickens’s periodical, *All The Year Round*, in 1860, the captain of a newly arrived ship in the harbour of a small seaside village sends his steward to the post office in order to enquire after a family he is seeking who he believed to live locally.¹¹ More typically this role was often just a small but significant aspect of the plot.¹²

¹⁰ Lawson, ‘Letters to Jack Cornstalk’, 191. See also: Anon, ‘Nobody’s House’, *Little Folks*, 31 (1890), 408; Anon, ‘Pages from a Private Diary’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 29, 1 (July 1896), 98.

¹¹ Anon, ‘A Message from the Sea’, *All The Year Round* (Christmas 1860), 2. See also: Holland, S., ‘One Whitsuntide’, *Young Folks*, 861 (28th May 1887), 347.

¹² For example: CR, ‘What the People Read: A Village Shopkeeper’, *The Academy*, 1371 (13th August 1898), 156; Holbeach, H., ‘Shoemakers’ Village’, *Argosy*, 3, 1 (December 1866), 69; Anon,

Such representations cast the shop as a service provider in the rural community, a link for and to the outside world, which was particularly relevant to the post office which acted as a conduit for communication from outside the village. Its significance was captured in a number of paintings, two of the earliest produced by Edward Villiers Ripplingille (1798-1859) in 1819 and 1837 (Figures 3.3 and 3.4 in Chapter 3).¹³ He depicts the post office as a busy meeting place for a cross-section of rural society, placing it at the heart of the rural community, villagers shown engrossed in poring over the letters, newspapers and goods delivered by the swiftly departing mail coach. Solkin has claimed that this suggested 'life in many villages had found a new spatial and temporal focus, centring on the local post office and its regular schedule of deliveries...the post office now functions not only as its centre, but also as its point of speedy connection to the rest of the country'.¹⁴ Yet the presence of the coach demonstrates that Ripplingille was not depicting a typical village scene as most rural areas were not on the coach routes and had to make their own arrangements to collect and deliver mail via the nearest post town, which was often a pauper paid a small wage for his services.¹⁵

Whilst Ripplingille's first painting was generally well received, some critics felt that it was overly crowded, therefore, as his later painting is a less congested and a more sanitised scene, it seems that Ripplingille listened to his critics.¹⁶ This hints at some resistance to the emerging realism in genre art. It is also unclear what impact he had on the wider public; the original painting provided him with success at the Royal Academy and in 1835 it was noted that he had a good reputation amongst other painters, yet his work was rarely engraved and it was thought he was 'but slenderly appreciated by the public at large'.¹⁷ Nevertheless, his paintings serve to demonstrate that the rural post office was an acceptable theme at a time when they were still relatively rare in villages, especially in remote hamlets, and the wider reputation of the village shop was still poor. He helped to pave the way for subsequent depictions of the rural post office, being followed by William Frederick Witherington (1785-1865) and Frederick Goodall (1822-1904) who both produced mid-century genre paintings entitled 'The Village Post Office', which portray social

'Who is the Heir?', *Dublin University Magazine*, 65, 385 (January 1865), 18; Marsh, B., 'How Two Sisters Live in the Country on a Pound a Week', *The Girl's Own Paper*, 15, 720 (14th October 1893), 27; Fleur De Lys, 'A Curious Poisoning Case', *Murray's Magazine*, 8, 47 (November 1890), 683; Ellis, D.G., 'The Fate of the Letter', *Temple Bar*, 110 (March 1897), 363.

¹³ Whilst they cannot irrefutably be confirmed as set in a village, as indicated in the previous chapter, they are worth reflecting on due to their pioneering subject matter.

¹⁴ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 196.

¹⁵ Rudd and Rudd, *A Village Post Office*, 30.

¹⁶ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 193-4. Some of the changes to the original painting: the agricultural labourer (identified by his smock) gazing earnestly into the shop window and the poor bare-footed urchin who had been looking longingly at the basket of seafood opened by the post boy are both replaced by an elderly labourer resting against the wall and a better-dressed school boy peering into a letter (who was in the far left of the original painting).

¹⁷ Watts, A.A., *The Literary Souvenir, and Cabinet of Modern Art* (London, 1835), 171.

interaction outside a rural receiving house, although Goodall's post office is housed in an inn as was common in the early days of postal services (Figures 4.1 and 4.2).¹⁸ As Ripplingille had done, they present the post office as a place where villagers could gather, linger, mingle and gossip, and succeed in conveying a sense of communal interest in both public and private news that crosses class boundaries. Interestingly, both artists show letters being opened, read and even shared outside the post office rather than being carried home to digest in private, which seems more likely. However, this might be explained in part by widespread illiteracy; indeed, a postal worker, author of 'A Provincial Post-Office' published in *All the Year Round* in 1863, recalled how 'for the poor we were often persuaded both to read and write their letters'.¹⁹



Fig. 4.1 'The Village Post Office'. 1853. Oil on canvas. William Frederick Witherington. Source: www.bbc.co.uk/arts. Original held by The British Postal Museum & Archive.

¹⁸ Goodall admits in his memoirs that he was inspired by David Wilkie, a hugely successful genre artist who was known for his aesthetic realism, whereas Witherington favoured rural family scenes and largely avoided depicting the harsher reality. Goodall, F., *The Reminiscences of Frederick Goodall R.A.* (London and Newcastle-on-Tyne: Walter Scott Publishing, 1902), 19; Bede, C., 'Peeps Through Loopholes at Men, Manners, and Customs: No.IX - County Letter Carriers', *Leisure Hour*, 873 (19th September 1868), 605.

¹⁹ Anon, 'A Provincial Post-Office', *All The Year Round*, 9, 201 (28th February 1863), 14.



Fig. 4.2 'The Village Post Office'. 1849. Oil on panel. Frederick Goodall. Source: Victoria & Albert Museum, www.vam.ac.uk (date accessed: 29/11/14).



Fig. 4.3 'The Post Office'. Engraving (after the painting by Frederick Goodall). C.W. Sharpe. Published in the *Art Journal*, 1862. Source: Wellcome Library, www.wellcomeimages.org (date accessed: 29/11/14).

These paintings may reflect a desire to emulate Ripplingille's success although both were well known and popular artists in their lifetimes, regularly exhibiting at the Royal Academy and having engravings rendered of their works. An engraving of Goodall's painting by C.W. Sharpe, for example, retained the main features of the painting but a number of notable elements were added including a glimpse of the inside of the post office, a bugle boy and a woman peering intently out of a window, her interest caught by the conversation of a group reading the Times newspaper (Figure 4.3).²⁰ Ripplingille had also featured the shop window in his paintings, depicting it as a vantage point from which village life could be observed by those inside or outside the shop, thus further highlighting its contribution to the social significance of the shop.

As genre or narrative paintings they would have appealed to the urban middle-class market, whose increasing influence had a profound effect on visual culture, the rise of prosperous middle-class businessmen-collectors changing the nature of art patronage. Keen to carve their own cultural path and proud of their links to industrialisation and modernisation, they spurned the elite tradition of coveting Old Masters, in favour of the work of living English artists.²¹ Bourgeois Britain therefore became the priority of the contemporary artist who enthusiastically welcomed the change, some becoming famous and wealthy in their bid to satisfy the taste of their middle-class patrons for modern English art, particularly paintings which depicted 'the daily incidents of life' and invoked intense emotion.²²

Such change helped to render the village shop an acceptable subject in popular art, a slightly later painting of a coastal village post office reflecting this growing trend for narrative art. The social realist, Walter Langley (1852-1922), a Cornish artist who was noted for his portrayal of working-class figures, particularly fishermen and their families, exhibited 'Among the Missing' in London in 1884 which drew widespread praise (Figure 4.4).²³ Its appearance on the front cover of the *Magazine of Art* was particularly significant as it was described as 'the only art magazine which at all keeps pace with the moving current of art'.²⁴ The painting depicts a scene in a coastal

²⁰ The newspaper is shown to be reporting British victory in the first Sikh War. www.britishmuseum.org (date accessed: 29/11/14).

²¹ This does not mean to suggest that elite art collections did not include work by living artists, just that they may have been from a different 'class' of painter such as Turner or Constable. Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 15, 32-3.

²² Anon, 'British Institution: Exhibition of Works by Living Artists: 1864', *Art Journal* (March 1864), 87.

²³ At the time a reviewer writing for *The Academy* described his work as 'admirable' and a 'large and noble scene' whilst a later piece suggests that it was 'the most notable work of the year'. Monkhouse, C., 'The Royal Institute of Painters in Water-colours', *The Academy*, 626 (3rd May 1884), 320; Anon, 'The Art Magazines', *The Academy*, 637 (19th July 1884), 50.

²⁴ Anon, 'Current Art – II', *The Magazine of Art*, 7 (January 1884), frontispiece, 392; Anon, 'The Art Magazines', 50.



Fig. 4.4 'Among the Missing - Scene in a Cornish Fishing Village'. 1884. Watercolour. Walter Langley. Image courtesy of Penlee House Gallery & Museum, Penzance. The painting was purchased with funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, the Art Fund, the V&A/MGC Purchase Grant Fund and the Friends of Penlee House.

community, the villagers gathered at the post office for news of fishermen who had gone missing following a shipwreck, thereby reinforcing perceptions of the post office as a centre for news and information.²⁵ It seems to juxtapose the individual experience of grief and the social interest in sharing news as a list of all the men lost at sea are posted on the shop wall for all to see. Langley demonstrates how receiving news in this way, rather than in a letter, meant that highly emotive experiences were played out in a public space amidst general social exchange and gossip. At the same time there is a sense of communal concern, the close-knit community drawn together in grief, which could provide comfort to those in need. This is emphasised by the central female

²⁵ A recent interpretation of the painting has suggested that as Langley was part of a colony of artists based near Penzance it is possible that the loss of a fishing lugger just off the coast in 1880 inspired the painting. Anon, 'History of the World: Cornish Items' (13th January 2010), www.news.bbc.co.uk/local/cornwall (date accessed 12/02/14).

figures, the older woman, who has perhaps experienced such tragedy before, leading the younger woman away. The postal worker who wrote 'A Provincial Post-Office' recalled such scenes during the Crimean war, the lists of the killed and wounded which were put on the outside of the window drawing 'working men and women, who clustered round it from morning to night'.²⁶ Notably, like Langley, both Goodall and Witherington had also included a woman seemingly sobbing in despair, an attempt to emphasise that news could be bad as well as good. Moreover, this trend for portraying social interaction outside the rural shop can also be seen in the sentimental paintings of the late nineteenth century which often focused on children gathering to gaze into the shop window (see Chapter 5).

These paintings reflect popular interest in the postal service, the Uniform Penny Post having been established in 1840, as well as growth in the provision of rural postal services.²⁷ A comparison of the number of rural post offices in the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent in the mid and late nineteenth century shows that their numbers increased between 51 and 153 percent (Table 4.1).²⁸ In two counties they also increased as a percentage of the total number of village shops although there was a slight decrease in Kent. Whilst the directories indicate that a significant number of these post offices were being run in their own right, the majority, between two-thirds and three-quarters, were combined with retailing or at least one other trade (Table 4.2).²⁹ Indeed, the greatest increase in all three counties occurred in the numbers of post office-retailers, up between 106 and 312 percent by the 1890s and coming to represent between 42 and 58 percent of rural post offices. It was an alliance which Winstanley claims was commonplace as 'the salary paid, especially to those in charge of non-money-order offices, was insufficient to maintain an individual, let alone a family. The sub-postmaster or mistress, therefore, looked for an additional source of income which did not involve working away from the premises; not surprisingly they relied on retailing'.³⁰ Conversely, in his 1862 book of trade hints for grocers, Hardy Woolley, who was a village shopkeeper himself, recommended that his fellow shopkeepers undertake the running of a post office:

²⁶ Anon, 'A Provincial Post-Office', 15.

²⁷ In 1854 there were over nine thousand country sub-post offices which rose to almost sixteen thousand by the end of the century. Stray, J., *Post Offices* (Oxford: Shire Publications, 2010), 13.

²⁸ The first postage stamp, the 'Penny Black', was released with the introduction of the Uniform Penny Post which replaced the old system of paying postage on delivery, the cost of which was calculated based on the distance that the item had been carried. For more information see: Farrugia, J.Y., *The Letter Box: A History of Post Office Pillar and Wall Boxes* (Fontwell: Centaur, 1969); Rudd and Rudd, *A Village Post Office*; Stray, *Post Offices*.

²⁹ It is also likely that some dedicated post offices were retailing other goods even if this was not apparent from the directories.

³⁰ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 201.

Table 4.1 Number of village post offices in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	Trade Directory	No. of villages	No. of village shops	Post offices			
				No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of village shops
Bucks	P.O. 1854	194	798	61	93	153	8
	Kellys 1899	206	897	154			17
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	318	1241	149	115	77	12
	Kellys 1897	333	1622	264			16
Kent	P.O. 1855	313	1275	187	96	51	15
	Kellys 1891	341	1997	283			14

Note: For a definition of what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3.

Source: *Post Office Directory of Berkshire* (1854); *Post Office Directory of Essex* (1855); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856); *Kelly's Directory of Kent, Surrey and Sussex* (Kelly and Co., 1891); *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1897); *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1899).

Table 4.2 Type of village post offices in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	Trade Directory	No. of village post offices	Type											
			Post office only				Post office-retailer				Post office-other			
			No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total village post offices	No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total village post offices	No.	Increase/decrease (no.)	% change	% of total village post offices
Bucks	P.O. 1854	61	20	30	150	33	17	53	312	28	24	10	42	39
	Kellys 1899	154	50			33	70			45	34			22
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	149	57	49	86	38	42	69	164	28	50	-3	-6	34
	Kellys 1897	264	106			40	111			42	47			18
Kent	P.O. 1855	187	48	13	27	26	80	85	106	43	59	-2	-3	31
	Kellys 1891	283	61			22	165			58	57			20

Note: For a definition of what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3; 'Post office-retailer' (shopkeepers, grocers, drapers, bakers, butchers and any other retailers); 'Post office-other' (craftsmen, farmers, professionals, innkeepers, carriers and those who had numerous occupations combined with a post office).

Source: As Table 4.1 above.

This all important position very often falls to the lot of grocers, the amount of important business performed through these institutions, even the humblest of them, is marvellous and ever on the increase, the Post-Office makes any trade position a nucleus [sic] for business, the appointment is worth attention but no sinecure.³¹

So, whilst acknowledging that a post office was hard work, beset by rules and regulations, he suggests that it could improve business. It certainly brought customers into the shop as it was not until 1897 that delivery to every house was guaranteed.³² As Chartres points out, ‘the pull of the village Post Office was powerful and thus a useful commercial weapon for the village trader’.³³

Interestingly, the statistics suggest that by the 1890s rural post offices were far more likely to be run by retailers such as grocers and shopkeepers than farmers, craftsmen and innkeepers, reversing the situation at mid century (Table 4.2). Literary culture reflected this increased tendency for the post office to be combined with retail trade as the multifarious general shop, which provided the roots of the cultural image, was often linked with the post office. However, unlike the artistic trend for depicting villagers socialising outside the shop, writers focused more heavily on portraying the inside of the shop, as a space in which villagers could congregate to discuss local matters and engage in communal gossip. For example, in a fictional series called ‘Country Notes’, published in *Macmillan’s Magazine* in 1898, a chapter entitled ‘The Shop’ describes a general shop and post office run by ‘Old Joe’ and his 9½ year old assistant, Ben, on an autumnal Saturday afternoon. The customers come up the road towards the shop as ‘a little crowd’ and once in the shop they appear to be in no hurry as ‘everyone buys slowly and without bargaining or keenness. They gossip a good deal comfortably among themselves’.³⁴ The rural working-class shopping experience is therefore depicted in terms of its sociability; it was more than just a shopping trip, it was a chance to socialise, a communal event.

The depiction of the shop as a draw for those who coveted news or gossip was commonplace, an article entitled ‘The Village Shop’ published in *Chamber’s Journal* in 1861 describing it as ‘the great reservoir and exchange of parochial gossip’.³⁵ The conversation to be found at the village shop was suggested to be valuable merely because it was enjoyable. The elderly gossip, Allie Jarvis, a character in a short piece of fiction entitled ‘The Post-Mistress’, published in *Household Words* in 1855, was certainly portrayed in this light. The narrator, a governess in the village, reveals that:

³¹ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 39.

³² Rudd and Rudd, *A Village Post Office*, 42.

³³ Chartres, ‘Country Tradesmen’, 309.

³⁴ Tallentyre, S.G., ‘Country Notes: II: The Shop’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 77, 462 (April 1898), 449.

³⁵ Anon, ‘The Village Shop’ (*Chambers*, 1861), 97. See also: Braun, S.E., ‘The Village Shopkeeper’, *English Woman’s Journal*, 12, 69 (2nd November 1863), 171.

When I am dull, or idly disposed, or wearied...I write a letter and carry it to the post myself...then I ask after the rheumatism, the finger-joints, and other chronic ailments of the venerable public servant, until we glide into the full channel of retrospective small-talk; for Allie is the chronicle of Moorbeck.³⁶

Allie's gossip is suggested to be interesting because it is 'about times gone by' and is therefore like story telling.³⁷

The shopkeeper was certainly not portrayed as a passive observer of social interaction in the shop, instead being consistently depicted as playing a crucial role as receiver and disseminator of news and light-hearted gossip, a conduit in the distribution and circulation of information. In this regard, the literature reveals far more about this role than the paintings which imply rather than explicitly depict the part played by the shopkeeper due to the artists' focus on portraying the outside of the shop. The value placed on this service is suggested in an article called 'Life in London' which was published in 1868 in *London Society*, a shilling monthly magazine. It compares the 'take-it-or-leave-it indifference' of the London tradesman with the country shopkeeper who will, 'indulge you with a little talk into the bargain'.³⁸ This emphasis on the comforting gossip of the village shop is, in effect, a critique of the functional and soulless urban shop as perceived by those who used them. Gossip served to strengthen individual relationships and the bond between shopkeeper and customer, one author going as far as to suggest that it was a characteristic of 'a real old shop': 'The place is a news agency. Gossip, a simple necessity of life to village society, is business here, not idleness. It is wrapped up in the parcels and handed across the counter'.³⁹ Whilst a rather generalising statement, the author, George Dewar, wrote from the perspective of a rural dweller, his family having been 'settled on the land [in north-west Hampshire] for generations' and therefore could lay claim to some first-hand experience of the village shop.⁴⁰

The process of shopping facilitated social interaction and shopkeepers would have been aware of the need to be sociable and exchange pleasantries in order to maintain good relations with their customers and thereby safeguard their trade. Woolley's trade hints include a section on 'how to attract customers', in which he suggests that aspiring country shopkeepers should be 'ever cheerful, with a care for the unfortunate, and reasonable leisure for the social intercourse of life', reasoning that:

The old lady who may have walked a mile or two to give you a preference has probably not much to spend, but she must be sympathised with in her tedious tales of trouble, behave

³⁶ Anon, 'The Post-Mistress', *Household Words*, 12, 292 (27th October 1855), 306.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 305.

³⁸ Anon, 'Life in London', *London Society*, 14, 82 (October 1868), 297.

³⁹ Dewar, G.A.B., *This Realm, This England* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1913), 138.

⁴⁰ Dewar, G.A.B., *Life and Sport in Hampshire* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1908), vii.

kindly to her, she will remember your shop, and soon return again with her married daughter or son, who may have more power of purchasing.⁴¹

Whilst rather cynical advice, Woolley was writing an advice manual therefore it is logical that he would draw attention to the commercial benefits of using social interaction to build relationships with local people. Sociability was worth investing in as it encouraged customers to linger and perhaps make additional purchases; it also helped to develop strong social bonds which might safeguard long-term economic relationships.⁴² The shopkeeper promoted sociability in his or her behaviour and the provisions made within the shop. Evidence of the provision of chairs, for example, which can be found in both trade cards and inventories, suggests that shopkeepers recognised the importance of facilitating and even encouraging the practice.⁴³ In urban areas in particular, as shopping developed as a pleasurable leisure pursuit, the chair formed part of the furnishings aiming to create a congenial setting for customers, which aligns with notions of polite sociability. It is therefore notable that cultural representations of rural retailing often included chairs or seating within the shop, helping to convey a sense of hospitality. This is clearly visible in paintings by William Redmore Bigg and Thomas Faed (Figures 3.2 and 3.9 in Chapter 3) and one of the earliest literary examples appears in Jane Austen's *Emma*, published in 1816, as part of a scene inside Fords, a drapers and haberdashery shop in the village of Highbury, which was 'the shop first in size and fashion in the place'.⁴⁴

By providing somewhere to sit, shopkeepers signalled to their customers that they were welcome to linger whilst they waited for their turn to be served or for their orders to be made up, which provided an opportunity to socialise with the shopkeeper or other customers. It also showed a certain deference, the shopkeeper standing whilst the customer sat, as shown in a serial story entitled 'A Ship Comes Home', published in a children's magazine in 1892, which includes an engraving of a scene inside a grocery shop, the shopkeeper gossiping with his seated customer whilst he made up her order of currants (Figure 4.5).⁴⁵ In a rural shop such seating might be

⁴¹ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 16-7.

⁴² Stobart et al., *Spaces of Consumption*, 158.

⁴³ Walsh claims that 'chairs and stools for customers...appear in nearly all inventories for shops' and Stobart has found that they are listed in 'the inventories of around one-quarter of grocers'. Walsh, C., 'Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-Century London' in Benson and Shaw, *The Retailing Industry: Volume 1*, 373; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 123, 135-7, 142, 211. See also Hann and Stobart, 'Sites of Consumption'.

⁴⁴ Austen, *Emma*, 134. When taking shelter from a 'heavy shower' Harriet 'sat, without any idea of anything in the world, full ten minutes, perhaps' before Elizabeth Martin and her brother entered the shop, their chance encounter and conversation proving significant to the rest of the plot. See Chapter 5 for further examples of the visual representation of seating in the village shop.

⁴⁵ Other literary examples include: Anon, 'The Clergyman's Wife: Life in Lightlands', *Household Words*, 19, 462 (29th January 1859), 198; Southworth, E D E N, 'Left Alone', *The London Journal*, 40,1030 (5th November 1864), 297; Kar, 'Jue's Puzzle', 207-8; Marshall, 'Hurly-Burly', 55;

rather informal, as suggested in ‘Barton Ferris’, a serial story published in the children’s magazine, *Kind Words*, the village shopkeeper, Job Selvedge, providing various seating including ‘one or two bags of rice and split-peas, which offered a tempting seat’.⁴⁶ The informality of the seating aligns with the suggestion that those who used it did not necessarily come into the shop to buy anything. In ‘Country Notes’, as Old Joe and his young assistant, Ben, serve the gossiping customers, ‘a village politician sits on a tub of oatmeal and reads extracts for Joe’s benefit, of which Joe does not hear a word, out of an elderly local newspaper’.⁴⁷ The narrator emphasises the fact that the ‘politician on the tub’ has ‘been there the whole afternoon, has bought nothing, and has no intention of ever buying anything’.⁴⁸ Perceptions of the shop’s role as a social space therefore include the supposition that it did not always go hand in hand with its commercial function, some customers portrayed as seeking out the company of the shopkeeper and/or other



Fig. 4.5 Engraving entitled “Bless me!” said the grocer, “to think of his impudence!”. Percy Macquoid. Source: Shaw, C., ‘A Ship Comes Home’, *Our Darlings*, 125 (March 1892), 152.

Walford, L.B., ‘The One Good Guest’, 33 *Good Words* (January 1892), 292; Hare, C., ‘The Albert Browns: A Tale of Christmas Eve’, *The Quiver*, 831 (January 1901), 106.

⁴⁶ Clarke, B., ‘Barton Ferris: A Tale of Country Life’, *Kind Words: A weekly magazine for boys and girls* (November 1874), 331-2. This is also conveyed in a *Punch* cartoon entitled “Speeding Up” in our Village’ (Figure 3.7 in Chapter 3).

⁴⁷ Tallentyre, ‘Country Notes’, 449. See also: Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 331-2.

⁴⁸ Tallentyre, ‘Country Notes’, 450.

villagers rather than making a purchase. Indeed the shop seems to have functioned as an early form of social welfare, providing a comfortable and communal space for the lonely and marginalised, a place which could provide a sense of belonging. This aligns with Benson's findings in relation to the Canadian country general store, which attracted so many visitors in the winter that an observer writing in a trade journal observed that 'He will be a blessing to the store-keeper who will invent a stove that will eject loafers as well as emit heat'.⁴⁹

Part of the appeal of the shop was its informal setting, it was a place in which locals of all ages and classes could meet, mix and interact which contrasts with the formality of a parish church and is distinct from the village inn or tavern which was a male-dominated environment and often did not entertain the higher ranks of local society. Indeed, Fletcher uses the writings of Reverend Richard Cobbold of Wortham in Suffolk, who kept a written and visual record of his parishioners in 1860, to suggest that the village shop had taken over from the church as 'the new village centre...[which] lay at the heart of village life in the middle of the nineteenth century...the central foundation of the village community's social life...[since] the Parish church seems to have been entering upon a period of decline'.⁵⁰ This is reiterated by Philip in relation to the post office, who claims that it 'can be seen as taking over from the church or the manor house as the focus of village life'.⁵¹

Evidence of the significance of the shop as a social centre, which appears to validate the cultural imagery, can be found recorded in Reverend Cobbold's writings, as he describes Mr Browne's general shop and post office as 'a place to be much observed'.⁵² In an evaluation of Cobbold's work, Fletcher surmises that the shop was '*the* village shop, the most busy centre of village affairs and, no doubt, of village gossip'.⁵³ It can also be found in *Heatherley*, a lightly-disguised account of Flora Thompson's experiences at a Post Office in the village of Grayshott in Hampshire at the end of the century, in which she writes in the third person, casting herself as Laura. She describes some of those with whom Laura regularly conversed over the counter, such as 'a grave, earnest, spectacled young man' who 'would stay talking to Laura about books, quoting long passages and asking if she preferred this or that' and even asked her advice on a novel he was writing.⁵⁴ Clarence Henry Warren, who grew up in a village shop and post office in Mereworth in Kent, provides a little more detail on this social interaction in his autobiographical book, *A Boy in Kent*, as whilst assisting his father during hop-picking season, their busiest time, he

⁴⁹ *Canadian Grocer* (25th October 1895 and 27th January 1905) as quoted in Benson, 'Small-scale Retailing in Canada', 93.

⁵⁰ Fletcher, *The Biography of a Victorian Village*, 40.

⁵¹ Philip, *Victorian Village Life*, 132.

⁵² Fletcher, *The Biography of a Victorian Village*, 110-112.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁵⁴ Thompson, F., 'Heatherley' in Thompson, F., [Lane, M. (ed.)], *A Country Calendar and Other Writings* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 173-4.

overheard ‘the bold talk and bolder laughter’ that went on between customers.⁵⁵ He also recalled visits from Mr De’ath, the miller’s traveller, whose friendly relationship with his father meant that he always ‘strode, as by right, straight to the office’, which was ‘no more than a cubby-hole at the back of the shop’, his father taking a bottle of whisky and soda in with him.⁵⁶ The visitor’s ‘gigantic laughter, with my father’s in the background’ could be heard ‘every now and then...suggesting great jokes that were being enjoyed’.⁵⁷ This draws attention to the way in which social interaction could occur in private domestic space such as an office or parlour as well as in the public area of the shop.⁵⁸ Indeed, an invitation into the parlour was suggestive of some intimate acquaintance with the shopkeeper, Stobart’s analysis of the commercial use of domestic space in the early-modern town demonstrating that the use of space could transmute the usually formal roles of shopkeeper and customer to that of host and friend.⁵⁹ This is apparent from the diary of the eighteenth-century village shopkeeper, Thomas Turner, who entertained numerous local people with tea and cards.⁶⁰

As purveyors of domestic consumables, we know that shopkeepers were well positioned to be privy to their customers’ personal circumstances and therefore were familiar with the domestic economies of their customers; however, it is more difficult to ascertain the extent to which they socialised with customers and therefore to fully establish the significance of the shop as a social centre. Nevertheless, an analysis of the frequency with which customers visited the shop is revealing. In relation to the early modern period, Cox and Dannehl have suggested that evidence of regular trips, as found in credit ledgers, indicates that customers may have ‘enjoyed them’ as they were not motivated by the availability of cash.⁶¹ Stobart agrees, claiming that frequent trips to the village shop were social and cultural as much as economic and that the rhythms of shopping can be explained as much by the ‘attractions of the grocer’s shop as a place of sociability for the consumer’ as by their ‘purchasing power and the ability to maintain and manage domestic stores’.⁶² Evidence from the nineteenth century is useful in reiterating this point. Amongst the

⁵⁵ Warren, C. Henry, *A Boy in Kent* (Gloucester: Alan Sutton Publishing, 1984, originally published 1938), 28. For more information on Clarence Henry Warren and his literary works, including a photograph of him standing outside his father’s shop, see: Warren, G., ‘C. Henry Warren: A Contented Countryman?’, *Landscapes*, 12, 1 (2011), pp.1-23.

⁵⁶ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 53, 55-6.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁵⁸ Such space has been suggested to be an ‘inner sanctum’, which afforded some privacy. Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*, 9; Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 35.

⁵⁹ Stobart, ‘Accommodating the Shop’, 363.

⁶⁰ Turner, *The Diary of a Village Shopkeeper*, 344, 388. A ‘group of equals’ used his house as a social venue. Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 36.

⁶¹ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 44.

⁶² Stobart uses the ledgers of a shopkeeper in Greens Norton at the end of the eighteenth century to show that some plebeian customers visited the shop several times a day, which he claims can

most frequent visitors to George Hooper's shop in Windrush, Gloucestershire at mid century were the Lock family, comprised of Stephen Lock, an agricultural labourer, his wife Mary, both aged in their sixties, and their unmarried son, Thomas, also an agricultural labourer. They visited the shop 120 times in 1853, the most significant month being August when they visited eighteen times, equating to a visit at least every other day. Significantly, at times they also visited more than once in a day as on 3rd September they bought four loaves and paid £1 on account before returning for bacon and cheese.⁶³ Visits on successive days are also noteworthy; later in the century, when the shop was being run by George's daughters, Elizabeth and Ann, the credit account of Mr George, the local police constable, shows that butter was bought on 18th March 1885, then it was jam on the next day, candles and salts on the 20th and boys caps and boot laces on the 21st.⁶⁴ As many of these items were non-perishable goods it might well be surmised that Mr George or his wife enjoyed popping into their local shop. Rather more extreme examples can be found in the records of Edward Allnatt's grocery and bakery shop in Sonning, Berkshire, which show that two of his customers, a gardener and carrier named John Brown and a retired baker named Thomas Furness, made remarkably frequent trips to his shop. In 1864 they made purchases on three-quarters of the days of the year, the most visits for Brown occurring in August when only four days were not listed, all of which were Sundays.⁶⁵ Whilst daily visits might imply a number of things including a lack of storage space, a continual need for fresh food and/or a lack of organisation, the consistency seems to imply that villagers may well have enjoyed visiting their local shop. It also demonstrates long-term continuity of behaviour as villagers had been shopping in this way in the previous century.

However, whilst evidence of the significance of the shop as a social centre appears to correlate with the cultural imagery, what was potentially misleading was the way in which the inside and outside of the shop were portrayed as bustling and lively, the latter most striking in the paintings of the rural post office. In reality, in all but the largest villages this was likely to have been a periodical phenomenon occurring in line with certain events such as the arrival of the mail or the

be partly explained by the sociability of the shop which he links with pleasure and notions of personal and social comfort. Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 202-6, 267, 272.

⁶³ GA: D1522/2/7. Various other customers also displayed such behaviour such as Mr Jackson, a stonemason, who purchased 1lb of cheese on 7th June 1853 and later bought loaves and cake. The same occurred on 13th August when cake was bought after loaves and flour had already been purchased.

⁶⁴ GA: D1522/2/8, credit ledger of Elizabeth Hooper of Windrush, Gloucs, 1882-86.

⁶⁵ Brown made purchases on 288 of the 366 days of the year (79%) and Furness on 270 (74%). MERL: D86/7, account book of the village stores at Sonning, Berkshire, 1863-74; Census of England: Berkshire: Sonning (1861-71).

payment of wages on a Saturday, the end of the working week.⁶⁶ This is evident in a day book kept by Frederick Evans Rolph, a grocer and draper in Lakenheath in Suffolk, as in one week in August 1883, for example, he recorded fifty-three visits to his shop, eighteen of which, a third, occurred on the Saturday, whilst he received just four customers on the preceding Thursday, his quietest day.⁶⁷ Indeed, evidence of the remote rural shop being a place of inactivity can serve as a counter to its representation as a hive of sociability, which is particularly apparent when the importance of Saturday trading is taken into consideration.⁶⁸

The female village shopkeeper: A nosy and interfering gossip?

Literary representations of the social role of the shopkeeper during the nineteenth century betray a notable gender distinction, the female shopkeeper, particularly the postmistress, dominating the imagery and being more likely to be aligned with gossip. This is conveyed in a late Victorian book written by the children's author, Mrs Walton, in which a village shopkeeper, Mrs Blunt, happily gossips with three of her female customers: 'The four women were standing in Mrs Blunt's shop, peeping from behind sugar-loaves, and tallow candles, and scrubbing-brushes, and piles of yellow soap, at a man who was walking quickly down the village street'.⁶⁹ As Mrs Blunt turns out to be a kind-hearted and harmless gossip, the scene is meant to give a sense of friendly conspiracy. She forms part of a female gossip network, the close relationship between the women reinforced by the secretive nature of their gossip. The role of the female shopkeeper in such gossip networks was similarly conveyed in numerous other examples, the female gossips depicted as drawn to the shop.⁷⁰

More pejoratively, the female shopkeeper was often portrayed as nosy and interfering. This is reflected in 'The Queen of Penwinnoc', a story published at the very end of the Victorian period, in which Mrs Dinnick, who ran the village shop, 'spent most of an ample leisure behind her

⁶⁶ Day books often show Saturday as the busiest day for village shopkeepers. Moreover, the significance of Saturday trading is conveyed in various literary portrayals, for example: Tallentyre, 'Country Notes', 449.

⁶⁷ SRO: FL517/13/106, day book of F.E. Rolph, a village shopkeeper at Lakenheath (1882-4). The week analysed was Monday 20th to Saturday 25th August 1883. His shop may have been closed on Sundays as they are not listed in the day book.

⁶⁸ For example, Winstanley has observed that the work involved long periods of inactivity, using evidence of the 'long, quiet intervals' at the post office in Flora Thompson's *Candleford Green* and has provided evidence of the significance of Saturday trading, such takings by Charles Coombs of Ickham in Kent in 1896-7 accounting for over 50 percent of each week's total during nine months of the year. Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 199, 212-3.

⁶⁹ Walton, Mrs O.F., *Winter's Folly* (London, 1889), 8.

⁷⁰ For example: S.R.M.A., 'The Heir of Crossley Hall', *Sharpe's London Magazine of Entertainment and Instruction*, 10 (January 1857), 51; Overton, 'The Schoolmistress', 683-4; Moule, M., 'The Thirteenth Brydain', *All The Year Round*, 7, 179 (4th June 1892), 551; Thompson, F., *Larkrise to Candleford* (London: Penguin, 2000, originally published 1945), 424.

counter in vague surmises as to her neighbours' affairs'.⁷¹ As the shopkeeper was perceived to play a valuable role in harmless gossip, such sociability necessary to maintain congenial relations with customers, it is therefore useful to think of gossip in terms of a sliding scale, from the type of innocuous discourse or polite chit-chat which passed the time of day but also might convey vital news and information, to its potential as a powerful weapon of malice and its manifestation as 'idle talk', which could damage both reputation and feelings and it is this which is of interest here.

Gossip has a long and fundamentally important history as a form of discourse and has therefore been given increasing scholarly attention, particularly by anthropologists, psychologists and, more recently, literary scholars and historians and is therefore an interdisciplinary field of research.⁷² It emerges as a striking and prevalent theme within literary representations of rural retailing, particularly in fiction.⁷³ According to the contemporary writer, Thomas Carlyle, the Victorian novelist appealed to 'a gossiping propensity in human nature which any man of sense can keep within bounds, but which none of us can eradicate'.⁷⁴ By including gossip and intrigue in their fiction, such authors would therefore have been aiming to appeal to a readership naturally predisposed to covet such entertaining material.

A village provided the perfect setting for such stories due to the intimate nature of rural communities. Jane Austen, for example, was aware of the nature of rural gossip and how it could function as a form of entertainment; as Mr Bennett declares in *Pride and Prejudice*, 'For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?'.⁷⁵ Thomas Carlyle suggested that 'we read the village gossip with as much concern as if the fate of the nation depended on it'.⁷⁶ The perceived remoteness of rural life, the lack of leisure activities and the intense familiarity within village communities, all of which contrasted with the lives of the predominantly urban readership, allowed authors to exploit gossip in any element of the plot to its full advantage. As Spacks suggests, novelists use gossip for 'plot construction', as a 'thematic

⁷¹ Burrow, C.K., 'The Queen of Penwinnoc', *Temple Bar*, 123, 487 (June 1901), 194. See also: Hare, 'The Albert Browns', 106.

⁷² For example: Spacks, P.M., *Gossip* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985); Tebbutt, M., *Women's Talk? A Social History of 'Gossip' in Working-class Neighbourhoods, 1880-1960* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1995); Gordon, J.B., *Gossip and Subversion in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996); Capp, B., *When Gossips Meet: Women, Family, and Neighbourhood in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Kartzow, M.B., *Gossip and Gender: Othering of Speech in the Pastoral Epistles* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2009); A special issue on gossip was published in *Review of General Psychology*, 8, 2 (June 2004).

⁷³ It can also be found in pictorial form. For example: 'The Village Gossips' (c.1828) by Rolinda Sharples; 'Village Gossips' (1860) by Samuel Baldwin; 'Village Gossip' (c.1860s-70s) by William Henry Midwood; 'Village Gossip' (1864) by Isaac Henzell; 'Neighbourly Gossip' (1889) by Carlton Alfred Smith; 'The Village Gossip' (1900) by William Lee Hankey.

⁷⁴ Skilton, D., *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2-3.

⁷⁵ Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 245.

⁷⁶ Skilton, *The Early and Mid-Victorian Novel*, 3.

device', most readily identified in fiction as 'the circulation of scandal'.⁷⁷ This is particularly significant in relation to the trend for sensation fiction during the Victorian era, writers utilising the village shop as a setting in which gossip occurred as a group activity, the shopkeeper an active participant in female gossip networks and implicated in the creation and dissemination of malicious gossip in rural communities.⁷⁸ For example, 'The Mystery of the Cave', published in 1885 in *Every Week*, which churned out cheap instalment fiction, not only features village gossips as a central part of the plot but also implies that the shop, particularly the post office, was a centre for gossip whenever a scandal emerged.⁷⁹ The subsidiary character of Mrs Page, the postmistress, is presented as a bitter and vengeful woman who plays a crucial part as a sub-villain. She is described as 'the leader of scandal in the neighbourhood, and general retailer of news', the villagers considering her to be a 'person of importance'.⁸⁰ She manipulates the villagers into playing a hand in her schemes by spreading her gossip, an ensuing scandal rendering her 'the centre of attraction to a host of gossips, who literally besieged the post-office for news'.⁸¹ It is therefore suggested that the shopkeeper was able to draw strength from their role in local gossip.

The characterisation of the female shopkeeper as a harmful gossip aligns most closely with the current definition of gossip, which is predominantly a derogatory term. Stereotypically depicted as an activity for women, the image is essentially coded as female.⁸² It has long been a subject in misogynist literature, women's talk 'stigmatized as gossip not because it differed in character from men's, but because it was perceived as the subversive behaviour of subordinates'.⁸³ It was not

⁷⁷ Spacks, *Gossip*, chapter 1.

⁷⁸ In its classic format sensation fiction portrayed themes such as insanity, seduction and violence within a relatively ordinary setting, such as a rural parish. Therefore gossip, as a speculative language, heightened sensation and intrigue whilst simultaneously providing a sense of familiarity and believability. It was a familiar format within cheap, low-brow weekly magazines, often derogatorily labelled 'penny dreadfuls', which were aimed at the literate working class, as well within the monthly middle-class family magazines, known as shilling monthlies, although they tended to portray a 'more respectable genre of fiction' which Jennifer Phegley calls 'domesticated sensationalism'. It was the packaging of sensation writing within a respectable magazine format which rendered it acceptable to a middle-class audience. Phegley, J., 'Domesticating the Sensation Novelist: Ellen Price Wood as Author and Editor of the *Argosy Magazine*', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 38, 2 (Summer 2005), 180, 183; Wynne, D., *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 1.

⁷⁹ The role of village gossips is implied by the phrase 'sinister rumours'. Anon, 'The Mystery of the Cave; Or, Love's Quicksands', *Every Week*, 32, 819 (23rd March 1885), 180.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 177, 180.

⁸² The repeated association of gossip with female speech is ancient, Kartzow making this connection in her exploration of gossip and gender in biblical texts, what she calls 'ancient gossip discourse'. We are also familiar with the expression 'old wives' tales', typically associated with exaggerated or false stories, which demonstrates the role of women in the oral tradition of storytelling, which has been interpreted as 'unreliable gossip'. Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 8.

⁸³ Capp, *When Gossips Meet*, 63.

suggested that men never gossiped, just that it was *usually* a woman.⁸⁴ It was a gender stereotype that was widely disseminated by the nineteenth century, often by male writers and most typically taking a negative form. For example, in ‘The Letters’ by Tennyson, who was Poet Laureate during much of the Victorian period, the speaker describes how the woman he loved returned his tokens of affection after gossiping with her friends.⁸⁵

Whilst the association between women and gossip is an ancient one, it is worth considering the point at which the stereotype came to be widely applied to the shopkeeper or, more specifically, the female village shopkeeper and her female customers and acquaintances. Due to the long-standing association of women with purchases for the home, the discourse of the period characterised shopping as a female activity and therefore gender has always been central to the study of shops and shopping.⁸⁶ Gendered interpretations have picked up on the role of sociability, which links to the notion of shopping as a leisure activity.⁸⁷ The shop provided women with a space in which they could socialise as part of their domestic role (the alehouse being a male space), enabling work to be mixed with pleasure. Indeed, Hosgood has noted that the integration of female leisure into their domestic workplace resulted in talking or gossiping becoming the central social activity as it ‘could accompany almost any public domestic chore’, including shopping, which was part of the domestic culture.⁸⁸ The small shop therefore ‘acted as a clearinghouse for gossip, a central feature of women’s cultural network’ and has been described as the ‘housewives’ club’.⁸⁹

The cultural link between the shop and female gossip networks goes back to at least the seventeenth century and by the eighteenth century the association was well established and subject to some criticism in the discourse of the period.⁹⁰ The association was extended to the female shopkeeper as shown in a mezzotint which was accompanied with the following text (Figure 4.6):

⁸⁴ Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 30-31.

⁸⁵ Tennyson, A. Lord, ‘The Letters’ (1855) in Tennyson, A. Lord, *The Complete Works of Alfred Lord Tennyson* (New York, 1891), 101-2.

⁸⁶ Walsh, ‘Shops, Shopping’, 151, 163.

⁸⁷ For example: Berry, ‘Polite Consumption’, 380.

⁸⁸ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 447.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 447, 453.

⁹⁰ For example, in relation to the seventeenth century, Thomas Baskerville’s *Journeys in England* include his description of the women of Winchcombe knitting and chatting sociably as they made their way to the bakehouse early in the morning with their breads and puddings. Baskerville, T., ‘Journeys in England, Temp. Car. II’ as quoted in Anon, ‘The Welbeck Abbey Manuscripts’, *The Pall Mall Gazette*, 58, 8984 (8th January 1894), 8. In the eighteenth century, a male commentator remarked upon the situation to be found in the shops at the Palais de Justice in Paris in 1772: ‘a man must have more than legal impudence to run the gauntlet through such a number of chattering females’. Peckham, Harry, *The Tour of Holland, Dutch Brabant, The Austrian Netherlands, and Part of France* (London, 1772), 140, in Walsh, ‘Shops, Shopping’, 162.

Dame Brattle tells surprising News,
Dol Drab her Face with wonder screws
Jack Filch, while she turns up her Eyes,
Her Cash to his own use applies.

It represents a damning representation of female gossip in the shop, the artist portraying it as distracting, with potentially damaging consequences to both shopkeeper and customer (note the money being stolen and the dress catching fire). The image might be seen, Stobart observes, as ‘a critique of the social practices of the lower orders or a parody of the polite presentations of shops’ but nonetheless ‘reflects the reality of shopping as a sociable activity’.⁹¹ The link can also be found in broadside ballads, which were a popular and cheap form of entertainment.⁹²



Fig. 4.6 ‘The Chandler’s Shop Gossips, or Wonderful News’. Mezzotint. Published by Carrington Bowles. c.1770. The Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.

⁹¹ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 144.

⁹² One example tells the tale of a man and a woman setting up shop, the lines written to be alternately read or sung by each of them. The ballad is negative and critical, emphasised by its satirical tone and portrays the male and female shopkeeper in an unfavourable light, both condemned by their own words. Nonetheless, it is notable that it is the woman who is assigned the role of gossip. Anon, ‘Chandlers Shop’.

The most significant evidence can be found in Sir Walter Scott's 1816 novel, *The Antiquary*, one of his popular Waverley novels, which appears to have been crucial in shaping the association between the female shopkeeper and harmful gossip. At the very least it established a specific link to the post office, an institution still in its infancy outside London at that time. It includes the character of Mrs Mailsetter who ran a post office and 'a shop of small wares' with her husband in the Scottish town of Fairport, their shop 'a source more famous for the circulation of news than for their accuracy'.⁹³ In one scene she is joined in her back parlour by two local gossips, the butcher's wife, Mrs Heukbane, and the baker's wife, Mrs Shortcake, who amuse themselves by going through the letters: 'Mrs Heukbane was a tall woman, she held the precious epistle up between her eyes and the window. Mrs Shortcake, a little squat personage, strained and stood on tiptoe to have her share of the investigation' (Figure 4.7).⁹⁴ The information which they gleaned from the letters was then communicated throughout the town by the gossips.⁹⁵ Later in the story it is revealed that Mrs Mailsetter was to lose her office for, 'looking after other folk's business and neglecting her ain'.⁹⁶ Scott not only perpetuates the stereotype of the female gossip, but also makes a link between trade and dishonesty, all three women being tradesmen's wives. This reflects the negative image of trade in the early nineteenth century, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. In particular it hints at elite opinion on female shopkeeping, the suggestion appearing to be that trade rendered women unfeminine and debased their character, which is also apparent from the negative portrayal of Mrs Flint in 'Matthews, and the Last Days of Mrs Flint' (see Chapter 3).⁹⁷ The psychological strategies for selling and buying, from the very beginning, were understood to be gendered activities, the prevailing assumption being that production was characterised as male and consumption as female therefore shopkeeping was still understood by some to be beyond accepted gender norms.⁹⁸ However, it is important not to overstate this case as Walsh has shown that some forms of early-modern discourse such as novels drew on or developed 'a different strand of social understanding than economic commentators', presenting shops as 'sanctuaries' for women and shopwork or shopkeeping as a 'suitable, morally resonant occupation for single females', using it as a literary tool to symbolise female decency of character.⁹⁹ It is a reminder that opinion could change over time and that different source material can provide alternative viewpoints.

⁹³ Scott, Sir W., *The Antiquary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, original published 1816), 144.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 139.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 417.

⁹⁷ It is notable that the caricature of the female shopkeeper rendered them unfeminine whilst that of the male shopkeeper or assistant tended to feminise or emasculate them.

⁹⁸ Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects*, 74.

⁹⁹ Walsh, 'Productive Shopping'.



Fig. 4.7 Engraving entitled 'Mrs Heukbane and Mrs Shortcake'. George Cruikshank. Source: Scott, Sir W., *The Antiquary* (Boston, 1893, originally published in 1816), chapter 15, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/7005 (date accessed: 29/11/14).

Although set in a town, *The Antiquary* represents one of the earliest fictional portrayals of the post office, being retrospectively set in 1794, and therefore, in its exposé of professional misconduct, namely the tampering of mail, it may well have been one of the first to make this association. Rather than acting as a conduit for news and information in the community, the female shopkeeper and her female gossip network are accused of acting as a *filter* for information. In his portrayal of mail tampering it is possible that Scott was making a reference to the Post Office's history of fulfilling espionage functions which were well known in the late eighteenth century.¹⁰⁰ Rippingille's decision to include a school boy peering into a sealed letter in both his paintings (see Chapter 3), the first of which was exhibited just three years after the publication of Scott's novel, also hints at wider anxieties about mail tampering and at the very least serves to reinforce the portrayal of an intimate, gossipy rural community, emphasised by his depiction of female gossips in the far right of both paintings, although they appear far less sinister in the later version.

¹⁰⁰ Porter, B., *Plots and Paranoia: A History of Political Espionage in Britain, 1790-1988* (London: Routledge, 1989), 30, as quoted in Lawson, K., 'Personal Privacy, Letter Mail, and the Post Office Espionage Scandal, 1844', *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*, www.branchcollective.org (date accessed: 10/10/14).

The Antiquary was arguably one of the most influential early representations of the post office. Like much of Scott's work, which was popular and widely read across Europe, the popularity of the novel ensured that it was widely disseminated amongst what was predominantly a middle and upper-class readership. It got a good reception from the public, selling out within three weeks and going through a further nine editions in Scott's lifetime. This may explain why literary representations of the village post office thereafter, whether aligned with a shop or not, predominantly included a female keeper or postmistress. The novel's influence on perceptions of the rural postmistress is certainly demonstrable; for example, in a piece published in 1863, 'A Provincial Post-Office', the author, a postal worker, writes:

I must own that in all country places there is an instinctive suspicion and doubt of the post office. Sir Walter Scott's type of an inquisitive post-mistress, with her two gossips, holding up a letter before the light, is still the prevailing opinion about us; and, in fact, while looking over a number of old Postal Circulars...I find that in most instances of dismissal for "tampering with letters" the offender is a post-mistress, or a female employee.¹⁰¹

The author not only acknowledges the influence of Scott's novel on wider perceptions but uses the evidence from 'old Postal Circulars' to infer that it was female postal workers who were most likely to commit official breaches of trust. However, this is moderated with a claim that such betrayals of confidence were rare.¹⁰²

Contemporary concerns about mail tampering were fuelled by the Post Office espionage scandal of 1844, the government's involvement in the tampering of mail causing a vigorous debate in Parliament and the press, which brought such behaviour into the public eye.¹⁰³ It caused shock and alarm within wider society which was left to contemplate and ruminate over the potential implications. As Lawson has highlighted, 'the Post Office espionage scandal makes clear that private communication between and among citizens was becoming an important right in a nascent democracy'.¹⁰⁴ Like Scott's novel, it seems highly likely that this scandal influenced subsequent depictions of the rural post office, which continued to suggest that the postmistress was gossipy and dishonest in her trade. For example, a scathing attack appeared in 'Village Life', a short article published in 1908 in *The Academy*, which appealed to educated middle to upper-class readers:

It would probably amaze the average Londoner to be told that it is quite unsafe to send letters through many rural post-offices without sealing them with wax. Access to the letters

¹⁰¹ Anon, 'A Provincial Post-Office', 14.

¹⁰² Ibid. See also: Arnold, Rev. F., 'A Tale of the Post Office', *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 9 (August 1872), 162.

¹⁰³ Lawson, 'Personal Privacy'.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

invests the village postmistress with a peculiar importance. She becomes the high priestess of local scandal, having access to the mysteries of the most secret affairs. Quite recently a country postmistress in Cornwall was reported to London because she spread out all the letters and postcards, etc, on the little counter of her village shop for an hour before they were delivered, to be handled, turned over, read when possible, by kindred spirits.¹⁰⁵

Such accusations continued to reinforce negative perceptions of the rural postmistress by emphasising the power which such behaviour gave them. Yet this perpetually negative imagery was hardly a fair reflection of reality as it invariably failed to place evidence of mail tampering in a wider context. Indeed there is a suggestion in a story published in *The Argosy* in 1866 that the image was perhaps more potent than the reality, the narrator declaring: 'I have often wondered that the post-office counter, especially in half-retired, gossiping districts, is not the source of more disclosures than it is'.¹⁰⁶

A counter to this prevailingly negative image can be found in Woolley's 1847 book of trade hints as he urges his readers to recognise the value of a woman in the social role of the shop:

In attempting to attract customers what are we to do without Woman! the person who is engaged in a general country shop will find a good wife an invaluable aid...behind a Draper's counter, what does a clumsy man know about fine long cloth, babies' linen, and cap borders? how is he to enter into the chit-chat which customers like to indulge in upon making their purchases.¹⁰⁷

Shopkeepers like Woolley recognised the value of encouraging sociability within the shop and the ability of women to facilitate it. The representation of the village post office in Flora Thompson's *Candleford Green*, part of her semi-autobiographical trilogy, *Larkrise to Candleford*, a memoir of life in the Oxfordshire hamlet of Juniper Hill in the late Victorian period, also contrasts with the literary image. Whilst Laura acknowledges the destructive force of local female gossip, she stresses that it was usually light-hearted and harmless, such conversational gossip suggested to be the type which went on at Dorcas Lane's post office.¹⁰⁸ Miss Lane was portrayed as a woman who liked knowing people's business, but it is clear that she took the oath of secrecy seriously,

¹⁰⁵ Anon, 'Village Life', *The Academy*, 1901, (10th October 1908), 353. See also: Anon, 'Elsie's Victory; or, Not at Home', *The London Journal*, 54, 1380 (22nd July 1871), 49; Anon, 'A Village Post-Office', *John Bull*, 3, 414 (24th April 1886), 267; Buckman, S.S., *Arcadian Life* (London, 1891), 111-121.

¹⁰⁶ Holbeach, 'Shoemakers' Village', *Argosy*, 4, 1 (June 1867), 75.

¹⁰⁷ H.UU., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 40-3.

¹⁰⁸ Laura enjoyed the company of customers, 'especially the poorer ones, who would tell her about their affairs and sometimes ask her advice'. This indicates that they trusted and respected her opinion, elevating her to a position of authority. Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 405-6, 485-6.

Laura claiming that she ‘kept the secrets with which she was entrusted in the course of her official duties most honourably’.¹⁰⁹ Whilst the use of Thompson’s literary works as primary historical sources has been questioned (she herself admitting to taking greater licence in her later instalments), she claimed that her portrayal of Miss Lane and her post office were more reliable: ‘In *Over to Candleford* and *Candleford Green* I wrote more freely than in *Lark Rise*, and do not think I described any house or place exactly as it actually existed, excepting “Miss Lane’s” post-office forge’.¹¹⁰ Miss Lane was ‘drawn from a locally celebrated Mrs Kezia Whitton, who had inherited the forge from her father and for many years carried on the business and that of the post office as well’ in the village of Fringford (Figure 4.8).¹¹¹ Flora admitted in later life, in a letter to an acquaintance, that she ‘knew Mrs Whitton well...there is a good deal of her in my Miss Lane’.¹¹²

It is not possible to establish the extent to which women gossiped in the village shop (although Turner’s diary suggests that it was common practice) or the extent of professional misconduct by those running village post offices; however, what can be established is whether or not the predominance of the female shopkeeper, particularly the postmistress, was a fair reflection of reality. An analysis of trade directories for the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent in the mid and late nineteenth century shows that men were in charge of the overwhelming majority of village shops, emphasising the misleading nature of the imagery (Table 4.3). However, it is widely recognised that female shopkeepers were typically under-represented in contemporary sources due to the fact that the role of wives and other female relatives in the running of shops often went unrecorded. For example, in the 1861 census for Newnham, Northamptonshire, Newman Adams is listed as a ‘timber dealer and grocer’ and in an 1869 trade directory as a ‘shopkeeper and butcher’ yet it is not until the 1881 census that recognition is given to the fact that the grocery shop was run by the women in the family.¹¹³ The

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 395.

¹¹⁰ Barbara English has assessed the value of Thompson’s work as primary sources, declaring *Larkrise* to be a relatively faithful portrayal of a place and its people whilst the later books, *Over to Candleford* and *Candleford Green*, ‘cannot be regarded as primary sources, but only in the same light as fiction’. Margaret Lane has used Thompson’s letters to demonstrate her admission that the later books were a composite picture. Thompson’s perspective is particularly relevant here as, whilst she based her writing on her life as a post office assistant, at the time of writing she was actually the wife of a postmaster. She married John Thompson, a post-office clerk, who was promoted to postmaster in 1928. English, B., ‘Lark Rise and Juniper Hill: A Victorian Community in Literature and in History’, *Victorian Studies*, 29, 1 (Autumn 1985), 7-34; Lane, M., ‘Introduction’ in Thompson, *A Country Calendar*, 8-11, 26.

¹¹¹ Lane, ‘Introduction’ in Thompson, *A Country Calendar*, 15.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ The 1881 census shows that Newman was a ‘Timber Merchant’ assisted by his sons whilst his step-daughter, Henrietta, was ‘grocer’s assistant’ and his daughter, Catherine, was ‘shopkeeper’. His wife, Mary, was also involved in running the shop as it is her signature, ‘M Adams’, acknowledging payments. NRO: M(N)/09/4/466-7, account books of Dr and Mrs West for bread and groceries from M. Adams (1866-70); Census of England: Northamptonshire:

relative invisibility of female shopkeepers is a problem highlighted by Lawson who suggests that small shops in urban working-class areas were often run by women.¹¹⁴

It is therefore notable that the statistics show a rise in the numbers of female village shopkeepers by the 1890s, particularly in Gloucestershire where they represented nearly a quarter of rural shops. This indicates that more women were retailing in rural areas in their own right than at mid century, their increasing numbers going some way to explaining why they might have featured prominently in literary culture.¹¹⁵ In fact, Lawson's study of shops in Preston has shown that women, particularly widows, had a far higher survival rate than men, such longevity indicating why they might have been so often presented as the traditional stereotype.¹¹⁶ Indeed, as Lawson suggests, 'in absolute terms they represented a minority, but they were very long-standing



Fig. 4.8 Photograph of Kezia Whitton outside her post office and forge in Fringford, Oxfordshire. c.1890s. Image courtesy of William Plumb.

Newnham (1881); *Post Office Directory of Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire* (Kelly and Co., 1869), 80.

¹¹⁴ Lawson, 'Shops, Shopkeeping', 312.

¹¹⁵ It is possible that the way in which directories recorded ownership was changing but, even so, the willingness to record female ownership is telling. See Chapter 5 for the equivalent prominence of female shopkeepers in visual culture in the late Victorian period.

¹¹⁶ Lawson, 'Shops, Shopkeeping', 323.

Table 4.3 Number of village shops in three counties in 1850s and 1890s by gender

County	Trade Directory	No. of village shops	Number of village shops by gender											
			Male				Female				Company or partnership			
			No.	Increase/decrease (no.)	% change	% of total village shops	No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total village shops	No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total village shops
Bucks	P.O. 1854	798	698	-11	-1	88	91	88	97	11	9	22	244	1
	Kellys 1899	897	687			77	179			20	31			3
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	1241	1076	94	9	87	157	223	142	13	8	64	800	<1
	Kellys 1897	1622	1170			72	380			23	72			5
Kent	P.O.1855	1275	1133	528	47	89	126	110	87	10	16	84	525	1
	Kellys 1891	1997	1661			83	236			12	100			5

Table 4.4 Number of village post offices in three counties in 1850s and 1890s by gender

County	Trade Directory	No. of village post offices	Gender of post office employee							
			Male				Female			
			No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total post offices	No.	Increase (no.)	% change	% of total post offices
Bucks	P.O. 1854	61	47	64	136	77	14	29	207	23
	Kellys 1899	154	111			72	43			28
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	149	110	52	47	74	39	63	162	26
	Kellys 1897	264	162			61	102			39
Kent	P.O.1855	187	160	87	54	86	27	9	33	14
	Kellys 1891	283	247			87	36			13

Table 4.5 Trade of female village shopkeepers in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	Trade Directory	No. of female village shopkeepers	Trade														Total Shopkeeper, Grocer & P.O.	
			Baker		Butcher		Draper		Shopkeeper		Grocer		P.O.		Mixture/other		No.	%
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
Bucks	P.O. 1854	91	5	6	6	7	3	3	39	43	13	14	10	11	15	16	62	68
	Kellys 1899	179	6	3	5	3	11	6	77	43	17	9	26	15	37	21	120	67
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	157	5	3	4	2	1	1	69	44	15	10	30	19	33	21	114	73
	Kellys 1897	380	16	4	11	3	9	2	157	41	32	9	64	17	91	24	253	67
Kent	P.O. 1855	126	4	3	13	10	5	4	48	38	15	12	16	13	25	20	79	63
	Kellys 1891	236	11	5	14	6	10	4	103	44	25	10	16	7	57	24	144	61

Note (for all tables): For a definition of what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3. ‘Shopkeeper’ includes general dealers, general stores and ‘teadealers &c’.

Source (for all tables): Post Office Directory (1854); Post Office Directory (1855); Post Office Directory (1856); Kelly’s Directory (1891); Kelly’s Directory (1897); Kelly’s Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899).

and, as such, were probably seen as an established part of the community'.¹¹⁷ When narrowing the analysis to post offices, men still predominated yet the percentage increases for women were higher in two of the counties than those for all village shops (Table 4.4). Moreover, in all three counties their percentage share of the total was higher than those for all village shops, markedly so in Buckinghamshire and Gloucestershire where women ran 28 and 39 percent of rural post offices respectively by the 1890s. Such evidence is more significant if it is considered that these are minimum figures.¹¹⁸ The type of retail outlet is particularly significant as there were increases in the numbers of female village shopkeepers across all trades (although less so in butchery) and between two-thirds and three-quarters were either shopkeepers (indicating general trade), grocers or postal workers (Table 4.5). This aligns with Chartres' claim that general shopkeeping, which was spreading gradually during the second half of the nineteenth century, showed a remarkable and consistent pattern of providing an occupation for comparatively large numbers of women during the Victorian period.¹¹⁹ As cultural representations of the village shop were overwhelmingly concerned with portraying such trade, it seems logical that the female shopkeeper dominated the imagery. Retailing provided suitable employment as it allowed women to earn an income whilst not neglecting their household responsibilities.¹²⁰

Overall, whilst the cultural imagery seems unrealistically weighted towards the portrayal of the female shopkeeper or postmistress and is biased towards portraying a negative image, seemingly built on an ancient, misogynist stereotype, it does at least highlight the significance of their role which is difficult to ascertain from traditional sources. Indeed, it is worth remembering that there are 'complex issues regarding the relationship between a stereotype in a text and the historical context it aims at reflecting'.¹²¹ It is certainly noteworthy that the female shopkeeper was often portrayed as a strong, independent woman despite typically being characterised in a negative manner as gossipy, meddling and unfeminine. This hints at the progress made by women in the retailing trade during the nineteenth century which had made them more visible whilst simultaneously demonstrating their continued battle against gender stereotyping.

The male village shopkeeper: informed, respected and integrated?

The characterisation of the female shopkeeper as a harmful gossip contrasts with the apparent propensity to depict the male shopkeeper in a more positive light. Whilst portrayals of a nosy or

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Figures are a minimum as they not only tend to exclude women who ran shops on behalf of male relatives or employers but also the more humble retail outlets (see Chapter 5).

¹¹⁹ Chartres, 'Country Tradesmen', 309.

¹²⁰ Lawson, 'Shops, Shopkeeping', 326.

¹²¹ Kartzow, *Gossip and Gender*, 2.

gossipy male shopkeeper or postmaster can be found – indeed, men were certainly shown as village gossips – often in conversation at the alehouse, they were far more likely to be depicted as a victim or subject of local gossip or emphasis placed on the fact that they were not a gossip.¹²² For example, a short piece was published in *All The Year Round* in 1888 entitled ‘In a Village Post Office’, in which the narrator, a newly appointed village sub-postmaster, reflects on the fact that by taking over from the ‘great gossip’, old Mrs Pryer, under whom the post office had been ‘the local school for scandal’, her name seemingly contrived to emphasise her behaviour, her friends would no longer ‘enjoy such opportunities as they formerly possessed for obtaining information about their neighbours’ affairs’.¹²³ He claims: ‘I can confidently affirm that I have never betrayed by word or gesture anything that has come to my knowledge in my capacity as postmaster’.¹²⁴ Notably it is possible to find such gender distinctions in the work of female authors, the novel, *Madame Leroux*, by Frances Trollope, for example, opening with a scene in the shop of Mr Pinhorn, a grocer and general dealer who is making up an order of tea for a gossipy female customer. He discretely tries to steer between disrespecting those she is talking about and the risk of offending her, later stating: ‘Some of the ladies are so sharp - specially about each other - that they see more than ever was, or is, or will be; don’t they now?’.¹²⁵ Such writers were deliberately distancing the male shopkeeper from female gossip.

Other writers sought to emphasise the useful social role of the male shopkeeper, depicting him as a trusted and respected member of the community who might be relied upon for his sound advice, good judgement and intellectual conversation. In this regard, he was still considered to have played a role in village gossip and male gossip networks, it was just the nature of the conversation which was perceived to be more acceptable. Typically, emphasis was placed on their ability to engage in interesting and meaningful conversation and they were characterised as an important part of their community. This was certainly the case in ‘Barton Ferris’, a serial story published in the children’s magazine, *Kind Words*, in which Job Selvedge is portrayed as well known and liked in the village community, a man who refused to gossip even though he was

¹²² Examples of the literary portrayal of a nosy or gossipy male shopkeeper: Anon, ‘The Curate’s Volume of Poems’, *Fraser’s Magazine*, 31, 181-191 (January - November 1845), 84-5, 93, 182, 554; Seton, M., ‘Horace: A Novel’, *The New Monthly Magazine*, 15, 89 (May 1879), 544, 561. Examples of paintings of male village gossips: ‘The Village Gossip’ (c.1800-37) by William Collins; ‘The Morning Gossip’ and ‘Village Gossip’ by Walter Dendy Sadler (1854-1923).

¹²³ The name of Pryer seems deliberately contrived to emphasise her behaviour. Anon, ‘In a Village Post Office’, *All The Year Round*, 43, 1031 (1st September 1888), 205. See also: Anon, ‘Our Village Post-Master’, *The Ladies’ Cabinet of Fashion, Music, and Romance*, 14, 4 (October 1838), 224; Wrench, H.H., ‘Our Prize Papers: Humorous Account of a Village Auction’, *Young England*, 60 (September 1886), 428.

¹²⁴ Anon, ‘In a Village Post Office’, 205.

¹²⁵ When the novel was initially serialised in *The Graphic* it included an engraving to illustrate the scene which was the same one used two years later for the story ‘A Ship Comes Home’ in *Our Darlings* (Figure 2.5). Trollope, F.E., *Madame Leroux*, Volume 1 (London, 1890), 8, 68.

himself the subject of it.¹²⁶ Selvedge juggled his commitments as a shopkeeper with his involvement in local matters, which often meant he had to converse with notable local people whilst working.¹²⁷ Such characterisations continued into the Edwardian period, a fictional portrait of a village post-office published in 1906 in *The Saturday Review*, describing how the value of the postmaster and corn-chandler, Mr Mant, went way beyond his primary trade. He was a man of information, the villagers ‘accustomed go-between and peacemaker...and adviser-general’.¹²⁸

Some authors went further, describing the male shopkeeper as an ‘oracle’, as was the case in a poem about an elderly village shopkeeper which was published in *The Birmingham Owl* and *The Dart*. The poem appears to emphasise the deference and respect accorded to the old man and the weight of his opinion in the local community, yet his repeated assertion of ‘I dunno’ betrays a satirical undertone, the author superciliously mocking this rural prophetic mindset.¹²⁹ Nonetheless, a non-fiction article called ‘In a Suffolk Village’ published in *Belgravia*, a shilling monthly, attests to its existence, the author describing how the keeper of a small general shop in East Bergholt in Suffolk was believed to make oracular remarks, being ‘a great authority on the weather, also on cricket’.¹³⁰ What is particularly striking is the suggestion that the male shopkeeper and his involvement in male gossip networks were public and respectable in nature. Their discussions are depicted as open and purposeful whilst female gossip was considered secretive, shallow, dishonest and even malicious. This is apparent in Thomas Faed’s 1879 painting which, on the far right, clearly shows three men in the shop parlour through an open door (Figure 3.9 in Chapter 3). His depiction of relaxed and easy male sociability, in full view of those who came into the shop (by virtue of the open door), is certainly a contrast to the way in which George Cruikshank illustrated Scott’s *The Antiquary*, depicting the women gossiping in the shop parlour behind a closed door (Figure 4.7). However, the private meetings already shown to have taken place between Clarence Henry Warren’s father and Mr De’ath in the little office at the back of the shop indicate that this cultural gender distinction is misleading.

Warren’s childhood reminiscences also provide further evidence that the perceived role of the male shopkeeper as a respected member of the rural community reflected the lived experience.

¹²⁶ Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 38, 123, 136-7. See also: Hunt, M., ‘A Musical Triumph’, *Longman’s Magazine*, 14, 81 (July 1889), 288.

¹²⁷ For example, in one scene in his shop he is serving customers whilst engaging in a discussion with Gubbage (a farmer and churchwarden), Mr Tunstall (churchwarden), Miss Furze (schoolmistress) and Mr Westbrook (farmer). He then spots Mr Tristram outside who was due to bring him news and therefore dashes out to speak to him. Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 331-2.

¹²⁸ Anon, ‘Village Portraits: A Servant of the Public’, *The Saturday Review*, 101, 2627 (3rd March 1906), 265.

¹²⁹ Anon, ‘The Village Oracle’, *The Birmingham Owl*, 365 (22nd January 1886), 12. A very similar version was also published the following year: Anon, ‘The “Far West” Weather Prophet’, *The Dart: The Midland Figaro*, 535 (21st January 1887), 12.

¹³⁰ M F W, ‘In a Suffolk Village’, *Belgravia* (April 1898), 564.

He describes how ‘the most prosperous farmer in the district’, Mr Jackson, would visit his father at the shop for a gossip:

Hardly a day would pass by but he rode his mare on to the pavement in front of the shop, lifted the latch with his crop, and whistled to my father to come out and discuss with him the latest local news. And there he was now, turning in his pew and greeting my father with an unmistakable wink.¹³¹

Warren implies that there was an easy friendship between his father and the farmer, similar to that with Mr De’ath, but here he provides an indication that such a friendship extended beyond the shop. This aligns with evidence from the eighteenth century, men like Parson Woodforde recording that they socialised with shopkeepers and the diary of Thomas Turner including references to his connections with farmers and clergymen.¹³² Warren also recalled the popularity of their baker, George, who he often accompanied on rounds:

With men this popularity found expression through the direct and quiet manner in which they would discuss with him their more serious affairs, taking him into their confidence, weighing his pondered advice, as if there were unusual authority in his words: with women it took the form of a light-hearted conversation which would be continually broken by bouts of bold and infectious laughter.¹³³

Notably, Warren makes a distinction between the ‘serious affairs’ that he discussed with men and his ‘light-hearted conversation’ with women. In Thompson’s *Heatherley*, Laura also draws attention to the respect accorded to her employer, Mr Hertford the postmaster, by trade customers who ‘had a high opinion of his talents and taste’; he was ‘widely read’ and ‘a master of debate’.¹³⁴ The 1876 autobiography of a Scottish village draper is also revealing as it includes his recollections of evenings spent as a youth at a local shoemaker’s shop where he would become involved in lively discussions ‘on subjects ranging from the decline of an empire to the fall of a leaf’.¹³⁵ He also describes his close friendship with John Gibson, a grocer who lived next door with whom he went on holiday to the Highlands and had ‘many a pleasant discussion’.¹³⁶ In later life he took daily walks with the grocer and/or other local men including the village banker and a retired army major, described as a ‘gentleman’, during which they would discuss and debate various topics.¹³⁷ This kind of male gossip contrasts with his description of domestic female

¹³¹ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 102.

¹³² Turner, *The Diary of a Village Shopkeeper*; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 144.

¹³³ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 9.

¹³⁴ Thompson, F., ‘Heatherley’ in Thompson, *A Country Calendar*, 160.

¹³⁵ Anon, *The History of a Village Shopkeeper*, 45, 49-60.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 206, 213-7.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, chapter 24.

gossip, particularly one occasion when his wife was joined by various seamstresses in his shop parlour: 'Although, in courtesy, I had to restrain my feelings, the interminable gossip that was retailed at that time was somewhat offensive to me, and I was glad when their labours came to an end, and I regained undisputed sway in my own household'.¹³⁸ The draper therefore makes the same kind of gender distinction so evident in the literary imagery. Whilst such autobiographical evidence is rather subjective, it does at least establish the existence of intimate friendships and appears to validate the cultural image of the male shopkeeper as someone whose opinion carried weight in the local community.

Further weight was added to this image by literature which portrayed the male shopkeeper as a person who might undertake parish duties which suggested that they were well integrated into the rural community. For example, a story published in *Good Words* in 1894 included the character of Whiteaway the grocer, 'the second churchwarden, who was also on the Committee of Management, and trustee for the school under the National Society'.¹³⁹ The ability of the male shopkeeper to command authority in the community is conveyed in another story, 'Oddities in my Parish' in *The Quiver*, in which Jacob Sterne, is described as having 'great influence': 'He could command the votes at the vestry meetings; and when he said he would be Churchwarden, or District Surveyor, he knew he would be elected...Though I pursued a spirited policy in village affairs, I had always to consider Jacob Sterne as a power in the community'.¹⁴⁰

By undertaking an assessment of the place and role of the male shopkeeper in the rural community, particularly the structure and significance of their connections and their involvement in local governance, it is possible to test this imagery. As Stobart has suggested, 'involvement in parish or vestry gives one insight into social engagement and community cohesion'.¹⁴¹ A detailed analysis of a single community is useful here as it enables a multitude of relationships to be explored in sufficient depth. In the first half of the nineteenth century various retailers in Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire were involved in local governance, undertaking roles relating to the administration of the parish, which suggests that they were trusted and respected members of the village community (Table 4.6). William Eyles, a butcher, was appointed sequestrator of the vicarage following the death of the vicar, Thomas Watson Ward, alongside George Church, a carpenter, innkeeper and yeoman.¹⁴² A local baker, John Goosey, also took an active interest in local administration, holding the roles of churchwarden and land tax assessor.¹⁴³ The various roles

¹³⁸ Ibid., 259.

¹³⁹ Baring Gould, S., 'Kitty Alone', *Good Words*, 35 (December 1894), 151. See also: C.R., 'What the People Read', 156.

¹⁴⁰ A Village Parson, 'Oddities in my Parish', *The Quiver*, 31, 481 (January 1896), 949.

¹⁴¹ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 32.

¹⁴² BLA: ABA2/2/83/4, Sequestration bond, June 1825.

¹⁴³ BLA: QDL (1815-16); J1068. He was churchwarden in 1809, 1813 and 1814 and land tax assessor in 1815.

Table 4.6 The Gibbard family's eleven food and drink suppliers in Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire 1816-1829

Name	D.O.B.	Trade	Goods supplied	No. of bills	Timespan of bills	Seques- trator	Church- warden	Tenant	Yeoman Cavalry	Land
Church, George	1770	Carpenter, Innkeeper, Yeoman	Sugar, alcohol, spices, chickens	3	1816-19	✓	✓	✓		
Crump, James	1796	Head gardener	Fruit	5	1817-26					
Edes, John	1796	Baker	Bakery	40	1824-29					
Eyles, William	1790	Butcher	Meat	98	1816-29	✓	father	✓		oc
Goosey, John	1770	Yeoman, Miller, Baker, Grocer	Bakery, groceries	56	1817-19		✓	✓	✓	ow/oc
Grindon, Thomas	1768	Grocer	Groceries	72	1818-29			✓	✓	ow/oc
Higgins, John	1801	Butcher	Meat	6	1826-27					
Partridge, Mrs	unknown	<i>unknown</i>	Butter, cream	1	1826					
Pickering, John	1768	[general]	Groceries	28	1817-29			✓		oc
Smith, Thomas	1788	Shopkeeper/Grocer	Meat (for dogs)	1	1826					
Wykes, William	1796	Baker & Grocer	Bakery	18	1823-26					oc

Note: 'Land' indicates owner (ow) or occupier (oc). The trade of John Pickering could not be formally identified but as he supplied groceries, haberdashery, drapery etc he has been categorised as a general retailer.

Source: Bedfordshire and Luton Archives Service (hereafter BLA): Garrard & Allen archive (hereafter GA): 5-90, 2451, 2456, 2458, 2460; X25/6; J1068; ABA2/2/83/4; QSR1822/140; QSR1823/252; P112/1; Census of England: Bedfordshire: Sharnbrook (1841); *Pigot and Co.'s Directory* (1839); *Post Office Directory of Bedfordshire* (Kelly and Co., 1847); Lutt, N. (ed.), *Bedfordshire Muster Rolls 1539-1831* (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, Volume 71, 1992), 235.

Table 4.7 Local administration roles fulfilled by The Rolphs of Lakenheath, Suffolk

Name	Trade directory (year)			
	1891-2	1892	1900	1912
Albert Rolph				Surveyor of highways
Arthur Rolph	Tax collector	Tax collector	Tax collector; Land surveyor	Land surveyor
Edwin J. Rolph	Baker & farmer	Baker & confectioner	Baker & farmer; Clerk to the Fen Drainage Commissioners and Goward & Evans charities; Vice-chair of School Board	
Frederick E. Rolph	Grocer & draper; Clerk to School Board	Grocer & draper; Clerk to School Board; assistant overseer	Grocer & draper; Clerk to School Board & Parish Council; assistant overseer	Grocer; Clerk to the Burial Board & Parish Council; assistant overseer; rate collector
James Rolph	Farmer	Farmer	Farmer; Surveyor of highways	Farmer
James Rolph	Road surveyor; Superintendent to the Fen Drainage Committee	Ale & porter merchant	Ale & porter merchant	
Jonah Rolph				Naturalist; Clerk to Goward & Evan charities; correspondent to School Committee

Note: Only those involved in local administration are included, there are many more listed in the trade directories.

Source: *History, Gazetteer and Directory of Suffolk* (William White Ltd, 1891-2), 503-5; *Kelly's Directory of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk & Suffolk* (Kelly and Co., 1892), 1140-1; *Kelly's Directory of Suffolk* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1900), 227-8; *Kelly's Directory of Suffolk* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1912), 289-90.

which these men fulfilled within the local community may well have increased their contact with each other as well as with the local squire, John Gibbard (1774-1849), a member of the rural lesser gentry, a magistrate and a local administrative leader who patronised their shops.¹⁴⁴

Useful evidence of the active role of retailers in local governance can also be found at the end of the century. In Lakenheath in Suffolk a number of individuals who shared the surname of Rolph, therefore indicating that they were likely to be related either closely or distantly by blood or marriage, were involved in local administration over many years, either through a paid position or voluntary work, some of whom were retailers (Table 4.7). The grocer and draper, Frederick Evans Rolph, was particularly noteworthy, having held the posts of clerk to the School Board, the Parish Council and the Burial Board, assistant overseer and rate collector.¹⁴⁵ Collectively, the breadth of roles covered by the Rolphs over the twenty year period demonstrates their influence in the community and the continuity which they provided in that regard. Shopkeepers also got involved in other ways, such as taking on the role of the enumerator for the national censuses as Hardy Woolley did in 1861.¹⁴⁶ This willingness to become involved in local administration appears to follow a historic precedent as the Woods of Didsbury, for example, who were trading at the end of the eighteenth century, had provided parish clerks since the sixteenth century.¹⁴⁷ Indeed, in his 1862 book of trade hints, Hardy Woolley recommends that his fellow shopkeepers undertake parish duties although he urges caution to ‘young tradesmen’: ‘I do still think that a *young* man should pause before he imperils his position at the very outset of life, by aiding the public, before he is assured that he can maintain himself.’¹⁴⁸ He indicates that local roles and entering ‘politics and local disputes’ should be avoided by those new to business until such time as they could feel secure in sparing their time.

The male shopkeeper was also considered to be instrumental in the establishment of local institutions for the good of the village community. For example, in ‘Barton Ferris’ Job Selvedge allows one of his outbuildings to be converted into a Methodist chapel.¹⁴⁹ This implies that the shopkeeper was perceived to have the means and influence to make a difference in the local

¹⁴⁴ For more information on the Gibbard family’s consumption habits and relationship with village and urban retailers see: Bailey, ‘Maintaining Status’; Bailey, ‘Consumption and Status’; Bailey, ‘Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food’.

¹⁴⁵ More information can be found in SRO: FL517/12/10, copy correspondence book by F.E. Rolph, village shopkeeper at Lakenheath, in his capacity as clerk to the School Board 1899-1904. It also includes his outgoing correspondence in his role as assistant overseer and clerk to Parish Council and correspondence relating to his own personal financial dealings.

¹⁴⁶ Census of England: Lincolnshire: Moulton (1861). The role was also taken on by William Crisp, who ran a grocery, drapery and post office in Elmdon in Essex. Robin, J., *Elmdon: Continuity and Change in a North-West Essex Village 1861-1964* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 14.

¹⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 79.

¹⁴⁸ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 18, 39.

¹⁴⁹ Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 12.

community. A real-life parallel to this story is revealed in *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine* in 1887, the author, Reverend Coulson, describing how George and Mary Irwine, keepers of a tiny village shop in Birtley, erected a small building on the side of their house to act as a Methodist chapel.¹⁵⁰ Other shopkeepers were also willing to support the founding of local institutions, such as Joshua Green and James Marsh of Stansted Mountfitchet in Essex, who were:

intimately associated...in objects they believed likely to benefit the village; amongst them the founding of the Literary Institution, the building of the Central Hall, with Reading Room and Post Office, and the formation of the Gas Company in 1863, to which James Marsh was Honorary Secretary to the time of his death.¹⁵¹

By combining a shop with involvement in local matters this type of multi-tasking village shopkeeper was able to maintain a significant position in the community, their value emphasised in a report published in *The Leader* in 1856 regarding the murder of a Yorkshire village shopkeeper and his wife:

Mr Luke White, the murdered man, was much esteemed...He was the village druggist, grocer, and postmaster, and also entrusted with the transaction of all the parochial business, including that of overseer, vestry clerk, &c...His parochial trusts were not even confined to Bolton, but embraced several of the neighbouring villages where he was held in great repute for his general knowledge, but more especially for his accurate acquaintance with all matters relating to parish business.¹⁵²

The death of the shopkeeper was clearly a devastating loss not only to the village community but also to the wider surrounding area. Such evidence aligns with Hosgood's analysis of small shopkeepers: 'Whilst shopkeeping seldom enabled individuals to escape the world into which they were born, it could, nevertheless, enhance a trader's authority within the neighbourhood'.¹⁵³

Beyond an assessment of the participation of village shopkeepers in local governance, it is also useful to consider the structure and significance of their connections. A closer look at some of the social and commercial bonds which existed between the squire, John Gibbard, his village retailers and local farmers in Sharnbrook during the first half of the nineteenth century not only demonstrates that grocers, as well as butchers and bakers, were well integrated into the rural community but also that they were more intimately acquainted with local gentry than has hitherto

¹⁵⁰ Coulson, J.M.H., 'Memorial Sketch of the Rev. John E. Coulson', *Wesleyan-Methodist Magazine*, (March 1887), 173-4. See also: Vaughan-Lewis, *The Village Shop*, 10, 15.

¹⁵¹ Green, J.J. (ed.), *Two Hundred Years' History of a Country Business, 1687-1887* (Ashford, 1887), 8.

¹⁵² Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 39; Anon, 'Our Civilisation: A Yorkshire Tragedy', *The Leader*, 7, 351 (13th December 1856), 1182. The article reveals that Mr and Mrs White lived in the village of Bolton-upon-Deerne in Yorkshire.

¹⁵³ Hosgood, 'The "Pigmies of Commerce"', 453.

been suggested. It has already been shown that the relationship between squire and retailer went beyond the roles of buyer and seller to include a shared interest in local administration; however, John Gibbard was also intimately linked to his village food and drink suppliers as a landlord, landowner, farmer and local military leader, his choice of retailers linking closely to his status in the local community (Table 4.6). Two of his village retailers, John Goosey and Thomas Grindon, served as privates in the local Yeomanry Cavalry, of which he was Lieutenant at that time.¹⁵⁴ The Yeomanry Cavalry was a popular choice for local gentry and farmers who could enjoy the training and military manoeuvres on home defence without the risk of being compelled to serve abroad. The threat of invasion in 1803 meant that John Gibbard was essentially a military man until 1815 and his military connections to these local men is likely to have shaped their relationship in later years.¹⁵⁵ It certainly gives an indication as to why he spread his patronage between them, albeit favouring Goosey until he died. Thereafter his historical acquaintance with Grindon may be the reason that he overlooked William Wykes in his purchases of groceries.

John Gibbard's relationship with his local suppliers was also shaped by his role as a landlord as he appears to have felt obliged to patronise his tenants thus demonstrating a logical interest in their prosperity and fulfilling his duty and any expectation that they might have had in that regard. His three most substantial suppliers, Eyles, Goosey and Grindon, his butcher, baker and grocer, all counted him as their landlord as did Church and John Pickering, who was more notable for his supply of non-foodstuffs.¹⁵⁶ Following Goosey's death, a lack of any particular loyalty to the young bakers in the village, John Edes and William Wykes, who were neither tenants or connected to local administration, might account for his decision to split his patronage between them. The retailers' tenancies reveal that most had a stake in the land to varying degrees, which is almost entirely overlooked in the literary image, one exception being the fictional shopkeeper in *The Academy* who was not only parish overseer but had a 'bit of land to look after'.¹⁵⁷

Some of the shopkeepers were not just occupiers but land or tenement owners in their own right. Grindon was a minor landowner whilst Goosey owned nearly four acres, which included a yard, orchard, meadow and fields and therefore had a stake in the land in addition to being a

¹⁵⁴ Lutt, *Bedfordshire Muster Rolls*, 235.

¹⁵⁵ According to his epitaph in the local church, John Gibbard was 'Major of the Bedford Militia' and 'Colonel of the First Battalion of Local Militia'. Anderson, J.M., 'Family Story', *The Bedfordshire Magazine: A Quarterly Miscellany and Review of Bedfordshire Life and History*, 7, 49, (1959), 63.

¹⁵⁶ William Eyles rented at least four acres of land, Goosey rented seventy-four acres and part of a farmyard with barn, cart-hovel and hen house, Pickering rented a house and two acres of land, Grindon had a house and one acre and Church rented a very small piece of land, less than an acre. BLA: X25/5, GA2450, GA2451, GA2456, GA2458, GA2460.

¹⁵⁷ C.R., 'What the People Read', 156.

baker, miller and grocer.¹⁵⁸ He traded with John Gibbard, as well as his father before him, not just as a producer-retailer, but also as a yeoman, selling him various crops.¹⁵⁹ His status as a minor landowner is reflected in his listing alongside the squire on the 'Jury List' for 1810, this type of source often useful in throwing light on the history of the class of yeoman.¹⁶⁰ This connection with the land would explain why both Goosey and Grindon were privates in the squire's Yeomanry Cavalry earlier in the century and demonstrates that rural grocers could be thoroughly integrated into the rural agricultural economy and were not just derivatives of urban retailing. William Eyles' father, John, who had also been the squire's butcher, was also more than a mere tradesman as, like the squire, he owned property and land and was a local landlord, albeit on a much smaller scale.¹⁶¹ For example, in the early part of the century he rented a house to John Pickering, thus demonstrating the interconnectedness of local tradesmen.¹⁶² Having access to land in order to graze livestock was important for rural butchers, some of whom were engaged in farming to varying degrees. It was a dual occupation which could contribute to their financial viability.¹⁶³ Therefore it seems that the economic lives of the Sharnbrook butchers were tied to the local agricultural economy and 'closely mirrored that of farmers', akin to Stobart's findings for the eighteenth century.¹⁶⁴

As land and/or property owners, albeit some being relatively minor, these shopkeepers would have held some status within their community, their acquaintance with the squire and each other likely to have been strengthened by this common interest, as well as that of local trade. This type of minor involvement or investment in the land is often not apparent from sources such as census returns and trade directories. Indeed, an analysis of the number and type of retailer-farmers in the villages of the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent in the mid and late nineteenth century suggests that they represented just 3 to 6 percent of village retailers in the 1850s, reducing to just 1 to 4 percent by the 1890s (Table 4.8). Moreover, they were listed in just 10 to 20 percent of villages in the 1850s which by the 1890s had reduced to 8 to 15 percent. However, these retailer-farmers, overwhelmingly male, are likely to represent those with a more substantial stake in the land rather than those who rented or owned smaller plots who would have engaged in agricultural activity as a secondary economic activity or sideline. In that regard it is unsurprising that the majority were bakers and butchers as there was a direct link

¹⁵⁸ BLA: GA2458, J1068, QDL (1815-22).

¹⁵⁹ BLA: X25/5-7.

¹⁶⁰ Brown, Rev, J.E., 'Selections from Jury Lists', in Anon, *The Publications of the Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, Volume 4* (Bedford: Bedfordshire Historical Record Society, 1917), 63, 177.

¹⁶¹ BLA: GA2456, GA2458, X25/5, Archdeaconry of Bedford Probate (hereafter ABP): W/1807/8.

¹⁶² BLA: *The Poll, for Two Knights of the Shire for the County of Bedford, taken May 1807* (Bedford, 1808), 76.

¹⁶³ Martin, 'Village Traders', 184.

¹⁶⁴ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 34-5.

Table 4.8 Number and type of village retailer-farmers in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	Trade Directory	No. of villages	No. of shops	Villages with retailer-farmer(s)		Village retailer-farmers						Type of village retailer-farmer											
						No.		%		Gender		butcher-farmer		baker-farmer		shopkeeper-farmer		grocer-farmer		P.O.-farmer		mixture/other	
										M	%	F	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Bucks	P.O. 1854	194	798	38	20	47	6	45	96	2	4	16	34	10	21	7	15	8	17	3	6.5	3	6.5
Bucks	Kellys 1899	206	897	28	14	35	4	33	94	2	6	9	26	10	28	8	23	1	3	7	20	0	0
Gloucs	P.O. 1856	318	1241	43	14	59	5	59	100	0	0	32	54	9	15	9	15	1	2	4	7	4	7
Gloucs	Kellys 1897	333	1624	51	15	60	4	59	98	1	2	26	43	9	15	13	21	4	7	4	7	4	7
Kent	P.O. 1855	313	1275	30	10	35	3	35	100	0	0	13	37	4	11	11	32	4	11	1	3	2	6
Kent	Kellys 1891	341	1998	26	8	28	1	27	96	1	4	9	32	1	4	4	14	6	21	8	29	0	0

Note: 'PO-farmer' includes those who are also listed as shopkeeper or grocer in addition to post office and farmer.

Source: *Post Office Directory* (1854); *Post Office Directory* (1855); *Post Office Directory* (1856); *Kelly's Directory* (1891); *Kelly's Directory* (1897); *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (1899).

between their produce and the land. However, by the 1890s there were more shopkeepers, grocers and post offices being officially associated with farming, which suggests that many coveted integration into the agricultural economy and were able to achieve it. Alternatively, it may indicate that the recording of occupational titles was more likely to include reference to agricultural activities.

In portraying the sociability of the male shopkeeper outside the remit of his commercial role, many writers emphasised their friendships with other village men, particularly tradesmen and craftsmen. In contrast to the female shopkeeper, who was often portrayed visiting neighbours or utilising her own back parlour, the male shopkeeper was typically at the inn.¹⁶⁵ For example, the opening scene to Dickens' novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, originally published in serial form in his periodical, *Master Humphrey's Clock*, takes place in the Maypole Inn in the village of Chigwell in March 1775 and introduces Tom Cobb, a 'general chandler and post-office keeper', a 'crony' of John Willett, the landlord of the inn.¹⁶⁶ His acquaintances also include the parish clerk and the ranger, the friends described as 'very jolly companions' (Figure 4.9).¹⁶⁷ Whilst one of Dickens' least popular novels, it sold in substantial numbers and its cultural influence 'has been extensive', inspiring dramatisations, art, songs, dances and ladies fashions.¹⁶⁸ Similar characterisations can be found throughout the rest of the century.¹⁶⁹ This serves to emphasise the public role of the male shopkeeper in the rural community, which contrasts with the more restricted domestic role which would have been available to women.

Whilst it is difficult to determine the true nature of relationships or the sincerity of friendships, evidence such as the Scottish draper's autobiography proving most useful, there are ways in which it is possible to demonstrate that such relationships existed. The social connections of the Sharnbrook retailers demonstrates that they were intimately acquainted with local farmers and yeomen as well as each other (Figure 4.10). For example, William Eyles was closely associated with the Stonebanks family, his brother, Robert, being married to the step-sister of William Stonebanks, who farmed John Gibbard's land and undertook most of the carpentry work on his estate.¹⁷⁰ The Stonebanks family were also linked to George Church, who had been witness to the will of William Stonebanks' father, Lovell, who had been the squire's most

¹⁶⁵ Whilst Faed's painting is an exception in its depiction of men in the shop parlour, his shopkeeper is actually shown in the course of his work rather than socialising outside the remit of his commercial role.

¹⁶⁶ Dickens, C., *Barnaby Rudge: A Tale of the Riots of 'Eighty* (Ware: Wordsworth Classics, 2010, originally published 1841), 18.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁶⁸ Watts, C., 'Introduction' in Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, xiii.

¹⁶⁹ For example: Anon, 'The Master of Aynhoe', *The Leisure Hour*, 1014-9 (3rd June - 8th July 1871); Seton, 'Horace', 562-5; Anon, 'Footprints by the Wayside; or, Minnie Ball's Disappearance', *Every Week*, 28, 723 (16th May 1883), 305.

¹⁷⁰ BLA: P112; ABP/W/1834/12.



Fig. 4.9 Engravings depicting the inside of the Maypole Inn. Source: Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, Volume 1, chapters 1 and 33, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/917 (date accessed: 29/11/14).

important local tenant in the early nineteenth century prior to his son taking over the farm tenancy.¹⁷¹ Church subsequently chose William Stonebanks, with whom he had the skills of a carpenter in common, to be witness to his own will in 1834 alongside William Eyles.¹⁷² Just a few months after the death of Church and his wife in late 1834, a marriage cemented the bond between the two families as William's first cousin, George Stonebanks, married Church's daughter, Anne.¹⁷³ Like Church and Eyles, Goosey was also well acquainted with other yeomen in the parish as he was named as a 'friend' and joint executor in the 1814 will of a local yeoman, John Nailor.¹⁷⁴ As an executor, Goosey would have been trusted with intimate knowledge of his friend's financial and familial situation and invested with responsibility for successfully managing the estate. This builds on Stobart's findings in relation to the social bonds of rural butchers, demonstrating that bakers and grocers could also count their farming neighbours amongst their closest friends.¹⁷⁵

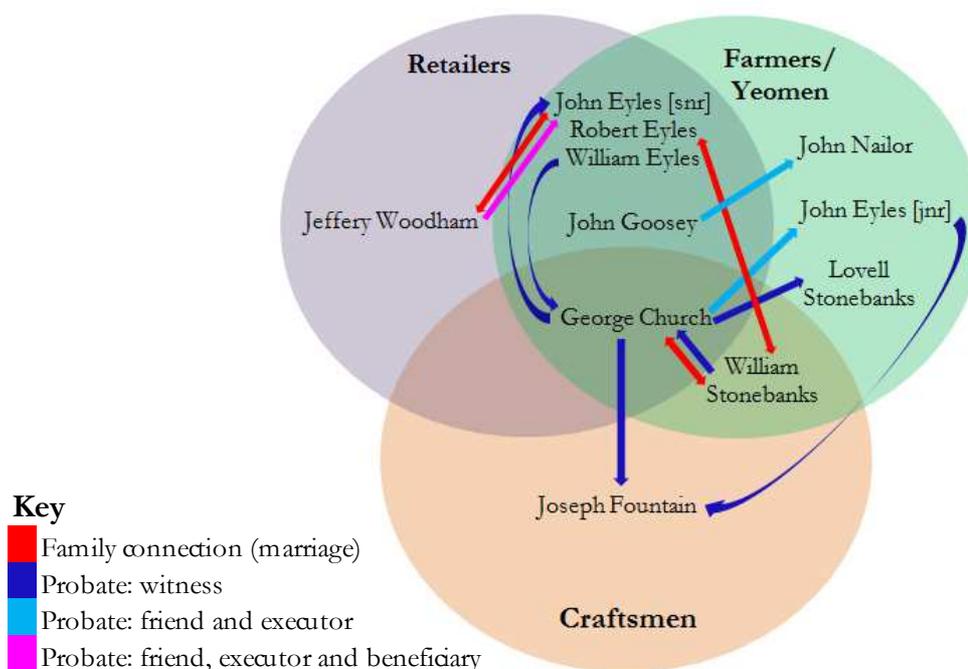


Fig. 4.10 Social bonds between selected retailers, craftsmen and farmers in Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire.¹⁷⁶ Source: BLA: GA632; P112/1; Z755/6; ABP/W/1807/8; ABP/W/1810/12; ABP/W/1814/40; ABP/W/1834/12; ABP/W/1835/20.

¹⁷¹ BLA: GA: 632, 2449, 2451, 2456, 2488. Lovell Stonebanks rented a farmhouse, farm buildings and approximately 400 acres of land from John Gibbard until he died in 1817. Various rental lists list 'L & W Stonebanks' which indicates that William was involved before his father died. The 1841 census lists William, his wife Mary and their four daughters as residing at High Street Farm. Census of England: Bedfordshire: Sharnbrook (1841).

¹⁷² BLA: ABP/W/1835/20.

¹⁷³ BLA: P112.

¹⁷⁴ BLA: ABP/W/1814/40.

¹⁷⁵ Stobart, 'Food Retailers', 35.

¹⁷⁶ Nearby villages are defined as those within 4 miles of the village.

Probate records are useful in shedding light on the social networks within village communities as they are ‘economic, social and cultural as well as legal documents’.¹⁷⁷ Stobart has shown how the executors nominated in wills can reveal friendship networks, the executorial relationships of rural butchers in Cheshire between 1660 and 1760 showing that their social horizon was mostly local.¹⁷⁸ The wills of local Sharnbrook men provide further evidence of an intricate social network between local tradesmen. Church was sole executor for his ‘friend’, John Eyles junior, a yeoman, who died in 1810 aged just twenty-seven, the son of John Eyles senior and brother to William.¹⁷⁹ Just two years earlier these friends had both been witnesses to the will of another local tradesman, Joseph Fountain, a collarmaker.¹⁸⁰ Two years prior to that, in 1806, Church had also been witness to the will of his friend’s father, John Eyles senior, who died in 1807.¹⁸¹ Eyles named Jeffery Woodham, who was baker for the squire at that time, as his ‘friend’ and joint executor and bequeathed him a one-third share in a substantial property portfolio of seven ‘messages or tenements’ with gardens and orchards in Sharnbrook, which demonstrates the strength of the friendship between the two tradesmen.¹⁸² Eyles’ friendship with Woodham may well reflect the fact that he had married Mary Woodham in 1780, formalising the tie between the families.¹⁸³ Overall such evidence appears to support Philip’s supposition that ‘the true village middle class’ were made up of ‘farmers, craftsmen and tradesmen’ who ‘banded together with a strong sense of mutual self-interest and village hierarchy, and were often also united by ties of blood’.¹⁸⁴ It also correlates with Stobart’s assertion that non-kin relationships within rural communities were strongly based on ‘common social and economic experiences’.¹⁸⁵

Conclusion

This chapter has established the significance of the village shop as a social centre and the shopkeeper as a central figure in the rural community. The economic function of shop and shopkeeper was often of cursory importance in nineteenth-century fiction and paintings, both the inside and the outside of the shop portrayed as a meeting place for the community, a focal point in times of crisis and a place of leisure, whilst the shopkeeper functions as a public figure, crucial

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 32.

¹⁷⁸ Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’, 32-4; Stobart, ‘The Village Shop’.

¹⁷⁹ BLA: ABP/W/1810/12.

¹⁸⁰ BLA: Z755/6.

¹⁸¹ BLA: ABP/W/1807/8.

¹⁸² BLA: ABP/W/1807/8. The two other ‘friends’ who inherited a share in Eyles’ Sharnbrook property alongside Woodham were Thomas Watson Ward, Clerk, Vicar of Sharnbrook, and William Whitworth of Bedford.

¹⁸³ BLA: P112.

¹⁸⁴ Philip, *Victorian Village Life*, 57.

¹⁸⁵ Stobart, ‘Food Retailers’, 23.

in the creation and dissemination of news, information and gossip in the community, a role often vital in driving plots forward or drawing them to a conclusion. Whilst the depiction of the shop and shopkeeper took both positive and negative forms, it appears to have correlated with the lived experience. It certainly served to acknowledge that the shop, particularly the post office, was a key factor in opening up the village to outside influences, acting as an information hub which served the needs of the whole community. However, the portrayal of the shop as bustling and lively was potentially misleading as it was likely to have been a periodical phenomenon in all but the largest villages. Indeed, it has been shown that just a handful of customers might be expected on a typical week day. The interaction presented between retailer and customer reinforces a connection already established between everyday shopping and sociability, the frequency of visits suggesting that villagers may have enjoyed them, the shopkeeper encouraging the practice by engaging in conversation and providing seating. A visit to the shop could be motivated purely by a desire to socialise with the shopkeeper which reflects behaviour in the early modern period, providing evidence of continuity. Moreover, the suggestion that the shop provided a social welfare function aligns with Benson's comments on the country general store in Canada, both in terms of its mythology and the practicalities of life on the frontier.¹⁸⁶ This reiterates the point that sociability was not peculiar to English shops; neither was it a distinct feature of the nineteenth century. It seems fundamental to the way in which shops and shopping work.

Contemporary gender convention inevitability had an impact on perceptions of the value of the place and role of the shopkeeper in rural communities. The portrayal of the female shopkeeper was seemingly built on an ancient, misogynist stereotype, their authority in the community restricted to idle gossip conducted over the counter and in the back parlour, thereby placing emphasis on the domestic nature of their role. In contrast the representation of the male shopkeeper centred around the reinforcement of masculine traits and patriarchal power, emphasis placed on their distinctly public role as a person sought out for their knowledge and intellectual conversation, which often took place outside the shop or at the local inn. Whilst it would be misleading to suggest that all male shopkeepers were intimately involved in their local communities or sought out additional duties, evidence of the overlapping of social and commercial bonds, the significance of non-kin relationships, the discharge of local duties and participation in local life suggests that they were a cohesive part of the rural community in which comradeship, respect and even friendship could bridge the class divide and influence the nature of interaction conducted within the shop space. Significantly, it seems that grocers and shopkeepers, who are often linked more closely to urban markets and tastes, were as capable of being well integrated in the rural community as producer-retailers such as bakers and butchers and craftsmen-retailers such as tailors and shoemakers. This aligns with Hosgood's findings in

¹⁸⁶ Benson, 'Small-scale Retailing in Canada', 92-3.

relation to small urban shopkeepers who were ‘firmly grounded’ within their community.¹⁸⁷ It certainly seems to counter the ‘virtual social isolation’ purported by Winstanley and the suggestion by Lin Bensley, who grew up in a village shop in Norfolk, that the village shopkeeper ‘had few close friends’.¹⁸⁸

Women were rather more restricted in their ability to hold positions of responsibility and leadership in the village community and therefore are less visible in the historical record in that regard, although progress was being made.¹⁸⁹ Yet the prevalence of the female village shopkeeper in contemporary cultural sources hints at the progress made by women in the retailing trade during the nineteenth century; it is testament to their increasing numbers, particularly in relation to general shopkeeping and the rapidly developing postal service. Many established a useful reputation and forged links within the rural community, such as Mrs Whitton, upon whom Flora Thompson based the character of Dorcas Lane. It is certainly significant that they were often portrayed as strong and independent, despite a prevalent derogatory tone, which suggests that the female shopkeeper represented a challenge (clearly unwelcome for some) to the relatively restricted sphere of influence, activity and engagement of women in Victorian society. Moreover, it is important to note that the role of the female shopkeeper as a ‘busybody’ was perceived by some contemporary observers, such as Hardy Woolley, as having a positive function. Their ‘chit-chat’ could be useful in spreading news and, as will become clear in the following chapter, their interference could be motivated by a kind and benevolent nature.

What seems clear is that the village shopkeeper was more than just a retailer, being also a friend, confidante and a person of standing whose opinion might have carried weight amongst local people. The shop was also more than just a commercial centre; it was a place to meet, interact, gossip and gather news, a site of personal and social exchange. Therefore, as sites of regular and varied interaction, which was unlikely to have been just that of buyer and seller, village shops facilitated the daily reassertion and strengthening of community relations. In that respect, rural shopping, it seems, was hardly dull; it played a crucial role in the dynamic nature of village life and society, the shop and shopkeeper contributing to the *vitality* of communal life.

¹⁸⁷ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 439.

¹⁸⁸ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 213; Bensley, *The Village Shop*, 19.

¹⁸⁹ This is acknowledged in an article published in *Westminster Review* in 1898 which goes on to show that increasing numbers of women were acting as Poor Law guardians and parish and district councillors. Ignota, ‘The Part of Women in Local Administration’, *Westminster Review*, 150, 1-4 (July-October 1898).

Changing attitudes: The sentimentalising of the village shop and the benevolent village shopkeeper

In the last decade of the nineteenth century a painting was exhibited entitled ‘Winter Evening: The Village Shop’ by one of the foremost painters of landscapes and rural peasant life, the naturalist George Clausen.¹ It represents a significant development in the evolution of the cultural image of the village shop, which is revealed in a review of a collection of his works published in *The Academy and Literature* in 1904:

He paints in the moonlight the village green or the village shop, and the scene vibrates in the senses, rousing all that emotion of the peaceful village drowsing in the wondrous shadow of the mystery of the darkness...It is as though some poet’s voice spoke to us. The lyric intensity of it all – and all just the simply beautiful thing we call an English village.²

The reviewer considered the village shop to be part of a scene so intensely stimulating that it ‘vibrates in the senses’. While rather hyperbolic, this not only reveals the prevailing association of rural life with tranquillity by that time but seems to suggest that by the end of the century the village shop was forming as much a part of an idyllic village scene as the peasant cottage. Rural retailing had been absorbed into mainstream landscape painting, the shop becoming part of the beauty of the village scene and therefore an acceptable part of the picturesque rural landscape, not something to be removed in order to enhance the aesthetic qualities of an image, as Repton had done in 1816 (see Chapter 3). It had become part of ‘Deep England’ which a few decades later Stanley Baldwin declared must be experienced through all the senses.³

Yet this was not a sudden occurrence; in an early twentieth-century literary study of the English village Patton has suggested that ‘the little shopkeeper came in with the going out of the pedlar’, rising in prominence from mid-century as other characters such as the miller, wheel-

¹ Neither the painting nor an image of it could be traced; however, a volume of sale records for Christies confirms that it was produced in 1889 and sold on 14th March 1908 for £8 8s and an article reveals that it was exhibited in 1890, the year after it was painted. *Art Prices Current 1907-8: A Record of Sale Prices at Christies’ During the Season* (Offices of the Fine Art Trade Journal, 1908), 105; Anon, ‘The New English Art Club’, *Women’s Penny Paper*, 76 (5th April 1890), 284.

² Macfall, H., ‘The Art of Mr Clausen’, *The Academy and Literature*, 1695 (3rd December 1904), 569.

³ Street, P., ‘Painting Deepest England: The Late Landscapes of John Linnell and the Uses of Nostalgia’ in Shaw, C. and Chase, M., *The Imagined Past: History and Nostalgia* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), 68-70.

wright and weaver sank into obscurity.⁴ More recently, in assessing the expunging of the village shop from the eighteenth-century literary and visual record, Cox and Dannehl suggest that the mid-nineteenth century marked a shift in the way that the village shop was viewed aesthetically; it was, they suggest, no longer ‘unpleasing’, but do not elaborate further.⁵ This chapter aims to shed light on this hint at change by exploring the romanticising of rural retailing in Victorian culture in the second half of the century as artists and writers began to emphasise the charm of the shop and to portray the shopkeeper as kind and benevolent. It was a gradual process which intensified in the last decades and into the Edwardian period. The first section briefly establishes the basis of change from mid-century, demonstrating how the village shop became part of a prevailing rural-urban narrative which encouraged idealistic attitudes towards the countryside and its people. The second section then examines the explosion of sentimental imagery in the mid to late nineteenth century as various writers, artists and illustrators, leaning toward the picturesque and away from the sublime, sought to render the village shop ‘charming’.⁶ The analysis evidences how a shift in tone and attitudes redefined the established characteristics of the village shop and its keeper, particularly the female shopkeeper, thereby diluting the effect of the established negative imagery. This is set within the historical context of the cultural progress of a burgeoning urban middle class whose influence increased dramatically during the latter half of the century. It will be shown that the visual imagery reflected their taste for genre art, demonstrating the trend towards the patronage of living artists which had begun in the first half of the century, and the literature suggestive of the proliferation of entertaining material aimed at respectable families and their children in the so-called golden age of childhood.⁷ Crucially it will be argued that the imagery reflected a need amongst the urban middle class, who were seemingly uncomfortable with the pace of change in the English landscape as the century progressed, for reassuring images of the rural which portrayed a slower pace of life, thus representing the antithesis of the Victorian tendency to celebrate perpetual progress.

The final section links closely to Chapter 3, analysis focusing on literature which increasingly portrayed the village shop as a valuable commercial resource in the rural community and, more specifically, the shopkeeper as benevolent rather than exploitative towards the rural poor, thus further reiterating a fundamental change in attitudes in the mid to late nineteenth century. Taking

⁴ Patton, *The English Village*, 218-9.

⁵ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 45.

⁶ Whilst I will be labelling such imagery as ‘sentimental’ and it is likely that many contemporary writers, artists and critics would also have viewed it as such, it is also important to acknowledge that many of the consumers of cultural material would not have been so consciously aware of the associated emotive significance.

⁷ Innovation in the publishing industry increased the number, type and circulation of cheaper press aimed at the middle and working classes, ensuring that literature was beginning to be disseminated across the class spectrum, at least in urban areas.

a less quantitative approach than previous chapters in testing this cultural image, evidence of the lived experience is drawn to a greater degree from the diaries, autobiographies, biographies and poetry of village shopkeepers therefore allowing the analysis to engage more fully with the thoughts and feelings of the shopkeeper and how they viewed themselves within the context of their rural community. What emerges is evidence which aligns with the more sympathetic cultural image.

The rural-urban narrative and the idealisation of the countryside

The countryside has provided inspiration for artists and writers throughout history, attitudes towards it having been shaped by the pastoral and the concept of a rural idyll which had originated as an intellectual's view of the countryside, a depiction for urban dwellers.⁸ Short has reflected on its ideological significance, the pastoral myth, declaring that it 'has become the perfect past to the imperfect present and uncertain future'.⁹ These perceptions changed and continue to change over time, as Mingay has observed: 'the rural idyll is a changing concept...each generation of country dwellers and observers sees what it wants to see in the land: romantic beauty, nostalgic traces of the rustic past, peace, tranquillity; despoiled landscapes, brutal intrusions of modernization, hurry, noise, pollution'.¹⁰ It depends on individual perspective and perception and, as Short points out, 'representation, the artistic re-creation of the physical world, reflects interpretation'.¹¹ The Victorians were no exception, reacting to the rapid change induced by industrialisation and urbanisation by re-evaluating and re-interpreting the countryside, including the village shop and its keeper, as part of a prevalent rural-urban narrative.¹²

Broad in its cultural context, this shifting groundswell of opinion encompassed commentators, essayists, poets, novelists and artists, many following in the same vein as the poet William Cowper, who declared that 'God made the country, and man made the town'.¹³ The radical, William Cobbett, for example, described the change in terms of it being 'unnatural' and the poet, William Blake, coined the now infamous phrases, 'dark satanic mills' and 'green and pleasant land', which have become part of the English language, metaphors to highlight the contrast

⁸ Short, *Imagined Country*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

¹⁰ Mingay, G.E., 'Introduction' in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 6. For more information on the development of the concept of the rural idyll see: Williams, *The Country and the City*; Short, B., 'Idyllic Ruralities' in Cloke, P. et al., *Handbook of Rural Studies* (London: SAGE Publications, 2006), 141.

¹¹ Short, *Imagined Country*, preface.

¹² For a detailed discussion on changing attitudes towards the country and the city see: Williams, *The Country and the City*.

¹³ For more information see Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 26-34.

between industrialisation and the rural idyll.¹⁴ It was, of course, a relatively simple concept to grasp and convey; aligning the countryside, essentially nature and all that is considered natural, against industrialisation, which included the city, a man-made, and therefore unnatural, industrial centre. This is reflected in the work of Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865) who compares the bucolic ease of a genteel life in the rural south with the fast-pace of life in the industrial north in her 1855 novel, *North and South*, although, interestingly, in drawing attention to the plight of the factory worker in the north she resists the nostalgic representation of the rural worker of the south.¹⁵ Others, such as George Gissing (1857-1903), made the comparison with London rather than the industrial north, *Workers in the Dawn*, published in 1880, emphasising ‘the roar, the fray into which various characters plunge’.¹⁶ Known to have had ‘a deep love of the countryside’, Gissing’s dislike of the city also emerges from his writings on Dickens in which he describes a ‘murky, swarming, rotten London’.¹⁷ Such overt contrasts can also be found in the artistic canon, William Wyld (1806-1889), for example, producing various paintings depicting a view of Manchester from the surrounding countryside which have become iconic representations of the contrast between rural and urban life and the effect of urban and industrial expansion on the landscape.¹⁸

Such cultural criticism was certainly fuelled by visible change in the countryside during the Victorian period. By mid-century the typical British subject was ‘an industrial worker in a town rather than a farmworker in the countryside’.¹⁹ Rural to urban migration triggered unease about a ‘flight from the land’ which became a public issue attracting a great deal of attention from writers and politicians. Perceptions of a decline in traditional rural life led to a reappraisal of the role of rural communities as a variety of investigators enquired into wages, working conditions, housing, and allotments.²⁰ The agricultural population began to gain recognition for their role in

¹⁴ Short, *Imagined Country*, 86. Whilst the focus here is on the prevalence of pro-rural and anti-industrial views, it is important to note that there were also those who pursued a counter-pastoral agenda, just as there were those who believed that the city and industrial advancement epitomised freedom and progress. For more information on the anti-pastoral and a discussion on Girouard’s two conflicting images of the city (Babylon and Jerusalem) see Short, *Imagined Country*, 28-52; 81-90. See also Williams, *The Country and the City*, chapter 19.

¹⁵ Gaskell, E., *North and South* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, originally published 1855), 381-2. In the novel the character of Margaret Hale seeks to dispel Mr Higgins’ assumption that work in the rural agricultural south led to a better quality of life.

¹⁶ Moore, L.D., *The Fiction of George Gissing: A Critical Analysis* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2008), 147.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; Gissing, G., ‘Introduction’ to *Bleak House* (1900) as quoted in Williams, *The Country and the City*, 224.

¹⁸ For example, in 1835 he produced ‘Manchester From the Cliff, Higher Broughton’ (1830) and he was later commissioned by Queen Victoria to produce ‘Manchester from Kersal Moor, with rustic figures and goats’ (1852).

¹⁹ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 23.

²⁰ Mingay, *Rural Life*, 190.

forming ‘the real backbone of the nation’ at a time when rapid industrial expansion and progressive urbanisation was seen to be threatening the countryside.²¹

From mid-century literary representations of rural retailing began to reflect this trend for comparisons of urban and rural life, which collectively emphasised the absorption of the village shop into urban middle-class perceptions of a rural idyll.²² The simplicity and honesty of a hard-working rural life is favourably compared to the corrupting influence of urban living in Dickens’ industrial novel, *Hard Times*, published in 1854 as a serial in his weekly periodical, *Household Words*. The character of Josiah Bounderby, a self-centred, dishonest yet wealthy urban factory owner can be compared with that of his mother, Mrs Pegler, a village shopkeeper, who is portrayed as steadfastly loyal, if a little downtrodden and meek. Bounderby’s control over his mother and the disowning of his past can be seen to represent the gulf which had emerged between modern, powerful, large-scale urban commerce and small-scale, old-fashioned rural trade.²³ Seemingly reflecting contemporary attitudes towards urban and rural life, and the perceived tension between them, Dickens describes Mr Bounderby as ‘a man perfectly devoid of sentiment’ who falsifies his mother’s true character.²⁴

I was born in a ditch, and my mother ran away from me. Do I excuse her for it? No. Have I ever excused her for it? Not I. What do I call her for it? I call her probably the very worst woman that ever lived in the world, except my drunken grandmother. There’s no family pride about me, there’s no imaginative sentimental humbug about me. I call a spade a spade.²⁵

His attitude towards his mother and rejection of his past hints at the disdain accorded to retailers by wider society at that time (see Chapter 3). Mrs Pegler, on the other hand, whose appearance in the town exposes her son as a liar, clings to her sentimental feelings, failing to see the reality of what he had become.²⁶

Later in the century such comparisons were more overt. In a story entitled ‘A Rich Woman’, published in the evangelical magazine, *The Quiver*, in 1879, the shopkeeper embodies the goodness perceived to be inherent in a rural way of life and has a purifying effect on those tainted by urban living. The plot centres on the village shop and post office of the remote, fictional

²¹ Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 108.

²² For example: Anon, ‘A Village Tale’, *The Leisure Hour*, 98-100 (10th-24th November 1853), pp.731-764.

²³ Coketown, the northern industrial town portrayed by Dickens, is also used throughout the novel as ‘the embodiment of an unfeeling materialism, a concern with profit at the expense of human feeling and social community’, Short, *Imagined Country*, 83.

²⁴ Dickens, C., ‘Hard Times’, *Household Words*, 9, 211 (8th April 1854), 165 (Chapter 4).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 190 (Chapter 6).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 574-6 (Chapter 33).

village of Winds Haven, which is run by the heroine, Chrystal Joyce, the shopkeeper's daughter. The setting is described using romantic language and clichés such as 'picturesque', which establishes it as a remote rural idyll sitting outside the rush and commerce of urban life. The village has 'no railway...nor are the limits of Winds Haven very well defined', which evokes a nostalgic no-where or Utopia, the shop itself set high above the houses and the church and commanding 'a prospect which palaces might envy', which is evocative of the moral high ground on which the heroine, Chrystal, sits.²⁷ She symbolises the wholesomeness and purity of rural life which contrasts with the character of Mr Esslemont, an urban banker, who is characterised as selfish, dishonest and exploitative, emphasised by his physical description as 'a tall, lean man, with sparse iron-grey hair, and a cadaverous visage'.²⁸ Chrystal's name not only reflects her nature, suggestive of her moral clarity, but also her actions, as she helps various strangers to see their way in life (i.e. seeing crystal clear).²⁹ She finds local positions for various poor urban folk so that 'once or twice darker threads of City existence got a chance of purification under the peaceful sunlight of Winds' Haven life and industry'.³⁰ Both Chrystal and a rural way of life are therefore presented as a remedy for the putrefying effect of an urban existence which produced 'sinners', the name of the village being an overt hint at its role as a moral 'haven'. This links to a wider trend in both art and literature for the countryside to be portrayed as an antidote to the undesirable consequences of urban and industrial advancement.³¹ Indeed, the contemporary author and critic, Leslie Stephen, who enjoyed reading about the countryside from his urban home, claimed that authors of country books were 'magicians' who allowed him to 'wander off through quiet country lanes into some sleepy hollow of the past', providing 'mental dyspepsia'.³²

Non-fiction articles also sought to portray the village shop as sheltered from modernity and the influence of urban markets, apparent in the opening of 'The Village Shop', published in *The Graphic* in 1889:

What Rip Van Winkle of a commercial gentleman is it who caters for the wonderful shelves of that little backwater of commerce, the hamlet's rustic store? No dashing shay or dogcart brings the silver-tongued and much-luggaged representative of great firms to the cobble-stones of this little porchway; no Lyons silk ripples on "calling days" in seductive folds from counter to floor-cloth here; nor do any rival weavers vex the judgement of this retailer with the latest things in brocades and webs from capitals of fashion and frivolity.³³

²⁷ Anon, 'A Rich Woman', *The Quiver*, 14, 681 (January 1879), 472.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 530.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 564-5, 625-28, 658, 690.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 690.

³¹ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 32-33.

³² Stephen, L., *Hours in a Library*, Volume III (London, 1892), 177-9.

³³ E.L.A., 'The Village Shop', *The Graphic*, 1003 (16th February 1889), 166.

The author places value on the remotest type of village shop, 'often the only representative of commerce for several long miles round of rough country roads', the reference to Rip Van Winkle encouraging the reader to conjure images of trade in a slow or sleepy wilderness, protected from the inducements of urban markets, the shopkeeper asleep to the rapid change occurring in the outside world.³⁴ Such a remote shop is deemed safe from the urban wholesaler, portrayed negatively using references such as 'silver-tongued', 'seductive' and 'frivolity'. This is suggestive of an anti-fashion stance, the modishness of new silks and cloths being condemned, which links it to wider criticism of urban commerce and consumption.³⁵

The representation of the village shop in this way, as part of a rural idyll set in opposition to urbanisation and industrialisation (both deemed a threat to the traditional rural way of life), forms part of a swathe of cultural material which idealised and sentimentalised rural life. Establishing the essence of complex but changing sentiments about the countryside provides the context for an exploration of changing attitudes towards the village shop.

Diluting the negative image: the 'charm' of the village shop

Criticism of the rural shopping experience began to lose much of its earlier intensity during the second half of the century. Significant change came in the form of a burgeoning urban middle class with increasingly idealistic attitudes towards the countryside. Having made considerable cultural progress during the nineteenth century, they commanded a greater influence, enthusiastically embracing entertaining or sentimental literature set in the countryside and paintings of rural scenes.³⁶ The concept of a rural idyll pervaded Victorian culture, a wealth of material engaging with its premise.³⁷ Yet this was not merely a perpetuation of traditional pastoral culture and depictions of Arcadia; realism was a dominant trend in art, the countryside and its people providing inspiration for a new generation of genre artists whose attention had been diverted away from the agricultural landscape and onto the village centre and rural society as they strove to portray everyday modernity. However, Solkin claims that by the 1850s and 1860s they had:

virtually deserted the countryside in favour of the city...[and] the rural returned to a version of the pastoral role it had played for many centuries, as the endangered repository of

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Rip Van Winkle is an American literary character who featured in a short story published in 1819, set in New York State. He slept for twenty years in the mountains near his village.

³⁶ Writers and publishers responded to this potentially lucrative market by increasing the breadth and depth of material available. A large number of new magazines and journals appeared which were specifically targeted at middle-class men, women and children.

³⁷ Brian Short has argued that the period between 1860 and 1930 was 'the high point of the rural idyll'. Short, 'Idyllic Ruralities', 141.

nostalgic longings for a simple and stable mode of existence, at odds with the ceaseless flux of modern urban life.³⁸

Nevertheless, interest in the village and its inhabitants remained, aided by the legacy of Mary Mitford's *Our Village*, published in the immediate pre-Victorian period.³⁹ Mitford's detailed portrayal of domesticated landscapes and rustic life had a profound influence on the subsequent move towards a sentimental interpretation of village life, contributing to a trend which has become known as idyllic realism.⁴⁰ Mitford, as Freeman indicates, was acting as an informant, giving her middle-class view of life in her village, and her influence, he suggests, 'is traceable even in some books of the Edwardian period whose contents are most clearly grounded in fact'.⁴¹

Writers were quick to react to this groundswell of interest, village life and society becoming a familiar topic within literary culture as a genre of rural literature emerged. The burgeoning periodical press was particularly influential in this regard, publishing simplistic, emotionally contrived literature and the kind of nostalgic sentimentality which idealised rural life despite the fact that romantic, gothic and sentimental narrative in nineteenth-century novels was beginning to be eclipsed by the realism of authors such as Dickens. The demand for such material is emphasised by Williams who claims that 'even after the society was predominantly urban its literature, for a generation, was still predominantly rural'.⁴² There was, as Horn suggests, 'a yearning to return to what were seen as the simpler verities of village life'.⁴³ This increased attention did not go unnoticed by those who lived in the countryside. Professing to have lived in the countryside all his life, Reverend Peter H. Ditchfield, a historian, author and priest, wrote in *The Quiver* in 1910 about the increased interest in 'the old villages of England' and those who lived in them, which he suggests have been 'discovered':

Perhaps the large and increasing number of monographs on the history of villages, sometimes unintentional "romances," and not very good history, has helped to dispel popular ignorance concerning English village life. At any rate, the village has attained some

³⁸ Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 241.

³⁹ This is suggested by Patton in a literary study of the English village published in 1918. Patton, *The English Village*, 215.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 3 for a short discussion on Mitford and her influence on subsequent authors. Mitford's treatment of rural life was an assimilation of influences which created a genre which 'was a modernised compound of traditional pastoral, Romantic social concern, Wordsworthian naturalism, novelistic human interest and lifelikeness, and at least glimpses of the evils and miseries so emphasized in traditional anti-pastoral, and in Crabbe and Cobbett'. Edwards, P.D., *Idyllic Realism from Mary Russell Mitford to Hardy* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 4.

⁴¹ Freeman, 'Social Investigation', 272.

⁴² Williams, *The Country and the City*, 2.

⁴³ Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 3.

popularity, except with some of those who live in it, and we have awakened from our sleep to find ourselves famous.⁴⁴

Ditchfield emphasises the scale of the cultural response which was fuelled by the ‘discovery’ of the countryside by the middle classes, his collective works forming part of a body of work which aimed to appeal to this market.⁴⁵

Such imagery also became commonplace in visual culture, as noted in an article published in *Country Life Illustrated*: ‘We are all familiar with the typical English village as represented upon the canvas of countless artists, who appear to find an infinite fascination in the quaint timbered houses with their thatched roofs’.⁴⁶ What Clausen’s painting demonstrates is that the village shop had become an integral part of such picturesque village scenes, artists like Rippingille, Goodall, Witherington and Langley having paved the way with their portrayals of the village post office. They had demonstrated that rural trade could be successfully incorporated into a village scene and, notably, that it could represent an interesting subject in its own right (see Chapter 4).

In this new era of ardent demand for sentimental imagery, one of the first artists to choose the village shop as a subject was James Hayllar who exhibited a painting in 1861 of an old woman behind a village counter entitled ‘Serving a Customer’.⁴⁷ The painting was favourably reviewed in both *The Examiner* and *The Times*, his work being generally very popular.⁴⁸ In its sympathetic depiction of an elderly, female shopkeeper, Hayllar’s painting represents a stark contrast to the prevailingly negative portrayals of the female shopkeeper in the literature of the first half of the century. However, he may have been inspired by a variety of literary representations of the rural shop, published just prior to the exhibition of his painting, which collectively betray a softening of attitudes. Many emphasise the ‘charm’ of the shop and redefine elements of the established negative stereotype. The multifarious nature

⁴⁴ Ditchfield, Rev. P.H., ‘The Romance of Village Life’, *The Quiver*, 45, 8 (June 1910), 725.

⁴⁵ Examples of the work of P.H. Ditchfield: *Our English Villages: Their Story and Antiquities* (London, 1889); *Bygone Berkshire* (London, 1896); *The Charm of the English Village* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1908); ‘The Romance of Village Life’; *Vanishing England* (London: Methuen & Co, 1910); *The Cottages and the Village Life of Rural England* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1912).

⁴⁶ Hardy, L., ‘The Village Street’, *Country Life Illustrated*, 4, 87 (3rd September 1898), 269.

⁴⁷ Neither the painting nor an image of it could be traced. Other similar paintings which could not be traced include ‘Wishing’ (1864) by Charles Sillem Lidderdale (1831-1895), ‘Adam and Eve’ (1887) by Stanhope Alexander Forbes (1857-1947) and ‘The Sweets of Life’ (1897) by Adam E. Proctor.

⁴⁸ Anon, ‘Fine Arts: The Pictures of the Year’, *The Examiner*, 2783 (1st June 1861), 344; Anon, ‘Exhibition of the Royal Academy’, *The Times*, 23938 (21st May 1861), 11. The artist’s name is misprinted as ‘Hazllar’. Reflecting his popularity, one of his paintings entitled ‘Soap Suds’ was turned into an advertisement for Pears soap entitled ‘This is the way we wash our hands’, Morris, E., ‘Advertising and the Acquisition of Contemporary Art’, *Journal of the History of Collections*, 4, 2 (1992), 197.

of the village shop, for example, was no longer widely derided, instead being portrayed as a visual spectacle to be cherished and fondly recalled. In 1860 a short article entitled 'A Village Shop' was published in the popular and respectable penny weekly, *The Leisure Hour*, which places emphasis on the usefulness of such a shop to the rural community. It forms part of a prevailing rural-urban narrative, the author, who purports to write from real-life observation, taking the urban reader, addressed as 'you, with your city notions', on a walk through Mr Potter's village shop in Gloucestershire to emphasise the contrast between the urban and rural shopping experience.⁴⁹ It generally has a light-hearted, complimentary, and, at times, sentimental tone, although it does betray some condescension, particularly when referring to the 'aboriginal inhabitants' of the village.⁵⁰ In direct contrast to the rhetoric of the first half of the century on the negative consequences of a monopoly on local trade, the author suggests that this feature of rural retailing is actually useful to the rural community as it concentrated retail trade into one multifarious shop. It is the *raison d'être* of the article, half of it given over to colourful descriptions of the stock of the shop with no suggestion that it was viewed as clutter.⁵¹ Instead, the author admires its breadth and highlights its value to the local community as well as the entrepreneurial skills of the shopkeeper. This is reinforced by descriptions of the various roles which 'cheery benevolent' Mr Potter fulfilled in addition to his general retailing, including chemist, druggist and medical adviser, postmaster, postman and money-office keeper.⁵² His daughter, Betsey, described as 'very patient and obliging' was also a scribe for the less literate.⁵³ The shop clearly served far more than just the basic requirements of the rural poor and therefore the value of the shop is suggested to lie in its ability to serve the needs of all the members of the local community.

Yet, the article also raises an important point about the way in which the reality of rural retailing was filtered for a cultural audience. The article is led by the established stereotype of a multifarious monopoly rather than a concern with portraying reality as Mr Potter's shop is introduced as a 'model shop of this useful class', the author choosing the shop to fit the stereotype.⁵⁴ Such a narrow interpretation of the rural shopping experience was misleading, the perpetuation of the stereotype demonstrating that the shift in attitudes had not led to a complete re-characterisation of the village shop. However, many of the negative connotations were replaced with more positive associations, particular characteristics taking on a new meaning when recast in a positive light. The persistent association with the exploitation of the rural poor, for example, is weakened, emphasis instead placed on the usefulness of the shop to the whole

⁴⁹ Anon, 'A Village Shop', *The Leisure Hour*, 456 (20th September 1860), 605.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 605-6.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 606.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 605.

community. The significant point here is that perceptions of what constituted a village shop had not changed, but attitudes towards it had, reflecting wider changes to the way in which the countryside and rural communities were viewed.

Even the perceived inefficiencies of the multifarious shop began to take on some cultural value. Sydney Savory Buckman's rather satirical *Arcadian Life*, published in 1891, for example, declares the jumbled nature of the shop to be 'truly delightful' and recalls the inefficiencies which this might create with some fondness:

By long practice the old woman can manage to lay her hand upon any of the articles in common request, and extricate them from their associates; but if anything out of the ordinary be demanded – as we ourselves have done before now – the reply is that “she’s got it somewhere, she knows, and would we come inside and help her look for it?” We comply, of course, and a quarter of an hour later finds us and the old woman groping on hands and knees over a miscellaneous assortment from the bottom of a cupboard.⁵⁵

Cox and Dannehl have recognised that if the cultural impact of retailing is given due consideration then economic inefficiencies ‘may well turn out to have had cultural values’.⁵⁶ Such evidence therefore supports their premise that retailing should be appreciated as a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon in order that social and emotional values are not overlooked.⁵⁷

It was not just the multifarious nature of the shop, however, that became imbued with value in the literature of the late Victorian period. Various other attributes of rural retailing, which had previously been portrayed as unattractive, were recast as essential elements of its charm including the odour of the shop and its state of cleanliness.⁵⁸ As many of the representational images of the first half of the century had done, these authors portray a trip to the village shop as stimulus for the senses, which might have a lasting impression on the memory, the crucial difference being that these authors depict a positive experience. For example, a short story published in *The Quiver* in 1904 suggests that the shop was clean rather than dusty and greasy, linking this to its appeal and placing its value within the context of its rural setting by portraying it as a natural part of an idyllic rural community. The plot follows the move from London to a cottage in the country by two sisters who find a welcoming community, a rich abundance of natural produce and a picturesque village shop:

⁵⁵ Buckman, *Arcadian Life*, 116.

⁵⁶ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 12.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ For example see: Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 36; Anon, ‘Rather Merry England’, *All the Year Round*, 42, 1009 (31st March 1888), 307; E.L.A., ‘The Village Shop’, 166; Hare, ‘The Albert Browns’, 106; Warren, *A Boy In Kent*, 56, 58, 62; Rose, *Good Neighbours*, 52.

[It was] a shop out of a picture-book, made all of wood, and scrubbed inside to an immaculate whiteness. It adjoined a tiny, old-fashioned house...and the shop was shut until you tinkled at a bell, and then the old woman or her granddaughter would come and open the door and serve you.⁵⁹

Along with the appeal of the shop's 'immaculate whiteness', the reference to the 'tiny, old-fashioned house', the use of an elderly female character as well as the description of the informal service adds to the quaintness of the scene. They hint at a slow pace of life and trade in a rural location, which creates the impression of a quiet, peaceful community. The village shop is rendered part of the rural idyll within which the sisters lived, the author likening the shop to the type you might see in a 'picture-book' which itself hints at the existence of a stereotypical image by that time.⁶⁰

The 'picture-book' which the author refers to may well have been *The Book of Shops* by the prolific writer, Edward Verrall Lucas, published in 1899. It is an enchanting book of poems and illustrations which sentimentally characterised each type of commonly found shop, including the 'Village Store'. Like the author who suggested that Mr Potter's shop was a representative example, Lucas chose the shop of 'quaint little hamlets', another rather narrow interpretation.⁶¹ Significantly, both the poem and the accompanying illustration by the popular artist and illustrator, Francis Donkin Bedford, demonstrate how the cultural image of the shop was recast in a positive light (Figure 5.1). The shop is celebrated first and foremost in the poem for its ability to cater for any need, its multifarious nature being the core representational image (stereotype) around which other familiar elements were added, in this case references to gossip and the odour of the shop. Bedford's illustration highlights the sociability of the shop as well as the multitude of goods and services on offer, including a post office and 'lending library' and rather than dingy, dusty and cluttered, the shop is portrayed as bright, clean and thoroughly organised, even the eggs being categorised. Moreover, the customers are neat and respectable, the shop portrayed as a place which the rural middle class and the clergy might frequent rather than the poor and working class, thus appealing to what would have been the target audience of the book.

A noticeable redefining of the unattractive attributes of rural retailing was also occurring in mainstream art, a useful example being 'The Village Sweet Shop' by the realist painter, Ralph

⁵⁹ Tynan, K., 'Their Summer at the Cottage', *The Quiver*, 61 (January 1904), 880.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 882. The story, whilst overtly sentimental and idealistic in its portrayal of country life, also represents the kind of 'domesticated sensationalism' which was wildly popular, particularly in the shilling monthlies.

⁶¹ Lucas, E.V., *The Book of Shops* (Chobham: Forum Books, 1990, originally published 1899), 23.

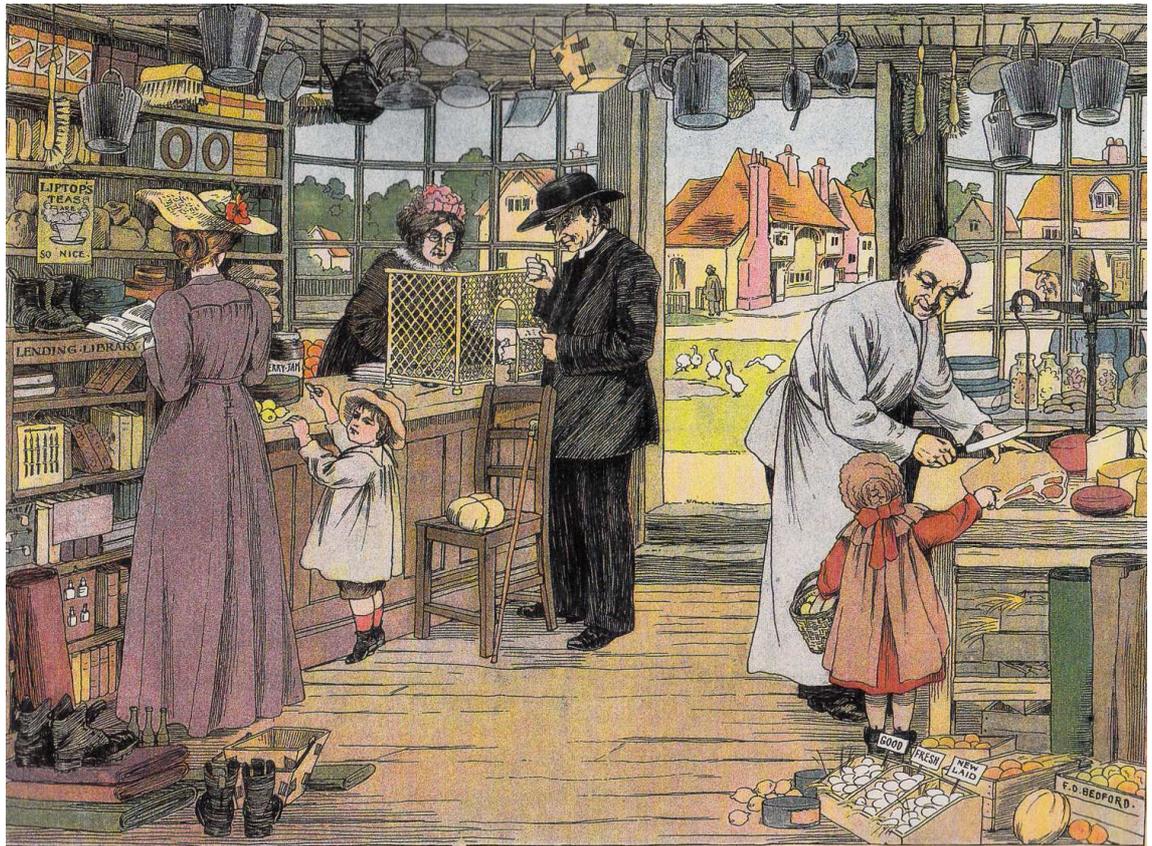


Fig. 5.1 'Village Store'. Colour litho. Francis Donkin Bedford. Source: Lucas, E.V., *The Book of Shops* (Chobham: Forum Books, 1990, originally published 1899), 23.



Fig. 5.2 'The Village Sweet Shop'. 1897. Oil on canvas. Ralph Hedley.

Hedley, which was produced towards the end of the century and was well reviewed (Figure 5.2).⁶² Hedley's use of light and dark is striking; at first the painting appears to reflect earlier characterisations of the shop as dark, dingy and aged, however, the gloom emphasises a charming scene at the window, the shopkeeper's face, along with that of the children, lit up by an oil or kerosene lamp, showing one of the boys outside the shop pointing to a plate of tempting tarts on display. The shopkeeper is elderly yet her shop appears neat and far from being dusty and neglected her goods appear to 'shine' in the window, adding to their appeal. Hedley's painting emphasises the importance of using lighting in shops to tempt customers, something which urban shopkeepers were well aware of by this time.⁶³ Whilst his painting is likely to have been produced in response to the demand for sentimental imagery, a realistic feel is still given by the evening setting as well as the class of prospective customer outside the window as such shops often remained open in the evenings to serve the working class, who were typically the most numerous customer at the village shop (see Chapter 3).⁶⁴

By the Edwardian period, cultural representations of the village shop were overwhelmingly concerned with emphasising its charm and romanticising reality, literary examples often forming part of works which aimed to celebrate the appeal of rural life more generally.⁶⁵ In this regard, many authors made a link between the village shop and its ability to evoke a sense of nostalgia. George Dewar, for example, aimed to woo the urban middle-class reader with a romantic and nostalgic interpretation of rural England in *This Realm, This England*, one reviewer declaring that 'half an hour of this book is enough to rouse a wild disgust with town – to send the imaginative reader post-haste for a time-table, eager to reach his favourite spot, be it summer or winter'.⁶⁶ This established the book (and therefore Dewar's interpretation of the village shop) as part of a cultural mood of anti-urbanism, which was well established by that time. In defining the shop Dewar follows well-trodden ground but goes further by stimulating his readers' senses to induce a feeling of nostalgia.⁶⁷ He claims that the odour of the shop, caused by the competing smells of

⁶² For a review of the painting see: Anon, 'Society Notes from the North', *Hearth and Home*, 349 (20th January 1898), 437.

⁶³ For example: Francis Place, a tailor in London in the first half of the century, acknowledged in his autobiography that he had used 'five large Argand lamps in the shop besides the candles to make the windows and every part of it as nearly equally light as possible', Thale, M. (ed.), Place, F., *The Autobiography of Francis Place (1771-1854)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 123 as quoted in Flanders, J., *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (London: Harper Press, 2011), 102.

⁶⁴ For more on the importance of late opening hours see: Hosgood, 'The "Pigmies of Commerce"', 451.

⁶⁵ For example see: Ditchfield, *The Charm of the English Village*, 102.

⁶⁶ Anon, [book review] '*This Realm, This England* by George A.B. Dewar', *The Academy and Literature*, 2166 (8th November 1913), 590.

⁶⁷ Dewar perpetuates the stereotype of the multifarious shop, declaring its keeper to be 'universal provider' to the village, 'its baker, its draper, its druggist, its grocer, its tallow chandler, its

'dips', bootlaces, tanned gaiters, corduroys and cheese, was one of the characteristics which could evoke strong memories.⁶⁸ As the stimulation of the senses is part of the nostalgic process, which idealises past emotions and displaces them onto sounds, smells, tastes and inanimate objects that were experienced concurrently with the emotions, it is hardly surprising that the strong smell of the village shop became a powerful trigger for nostalgia.⁶⁹ This highlights the importance of the senses, not only in evoking nostalgic memories in the author but also enabling the reader to imagine the shop described beyond mere visualisation. As Patrick Wright has suggested, it is a strong sense of evocation, of actually 'being there' and using your senses, that forges an attachment with 'Deep England'; essentially, experience is integral to this sense of Englishness.⁷⁰ Dewar makes a link with childhood memories, specifically that the charm of the village shop was rooted in nostalgic reminiscences of childhood experiences. The shop, he suggests, was 'the most undiscovered thing in hidden England...a mystery, a romance, clings to it which began in our childhood, and has not passed away with many childish things'.⁷¹ He may have been appraising the shop from the perspective of an adult but he was filtering this through his childhood memories which coloured his opinion. Significantly, as a member of the gentry and editor of *The Saturday Review* during the First World War, he provides an elite opinion on the village shop which was very different from those espoused in the first half of the century.⁷²

This link between the nostalgic reminiscences of a rural childhood and the charm of the village shop is evidenced in various memoirs published in the twentieth century, which provide a useful rural standpoint, albeit retrospective. Mary Wade, for example, who grew up on a farm in Bedfordshire in the late nineteenth century, declared that her favourite village shop 'was kept by two old maiden ladies' which was 'a real treasure trove'.⁷³ Walter Rose, a carpenter and author, also fondly recalled his visits to 'the principal store' in his village, describing the 'particular aroma, highly characteristic and quite different from anything anywhere else in the village' as well as his envy of the lad who chopped the 'large loaves of hard white sugar...into sizes convenient for the teacup...for hours on end, in the midst of sweetness'.⁷⁴ Clarence Henry Warren, a village shopkeeper's son, provides a more intimate perspective, his descriptions of his home, the village

stationer, its confectioner, its hatter, its leather merchant', and proposing that the 'charm of the true village shop is that nothing is inventoried in it'. Dewar, *This Realm, This England*, 132-7.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 134.

⁶⁹ Hirsch, A.R., 'Nostalgia: A Neuropsychiatric Understanding', *Advances in Consumer Research*, 19 (1992), 390.

⁷⁰ Wright, P., *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (London: Verso, 1991) as quoted in Reay, *Rural England*, 172.

⁷¹ Dewar, *This Realm, This England*, 132.

⁷² George Albemarle Bertie Dewar (1862-1934) is listed in Mosley, C. (ed.), *Burke's Peerage, Baronetage & Knightage, 107th edition, Volume 1* (Wilmington: Burke's Peerage (Genealogical Books) Ltd, 2003), 1133.

⁷³ Wade, *Knighton Grange*, 75.

⁷⁴ Rose, *Good Neighbours*, 51-52.

grocery, drapery and post office, including his recollections of ‘the aromatic darkness of the shop’ and the appeal it had for a child:

Almost everything about the shop was inviting to me. It had been many things in its time, including a public-house, and it possessed for a child all the obvious possibilities of a place that had been added to, chopped and changed out of recognition...its very craziness was part of its charm.⁷⁵

His favourite part of the shop was the warehouse which with the eyes of a child was ‘a really immense place’ making ‘an ideal playroom’.⁷⁶ Those early experiences left a lasting impression on his life: ‘I was exposed to a multitude of impressions that will lie in my brain, ready to come awake at any moment, until thought fails at last and the mind’s eye shuts for ever’.⁷⁷ Such reminiscences are childhood nostalgia and as such are highly selective insights into the past which are heavily filtered by the perspective of the child and the passage of time. Yet despite their obvious drawbacks as sources, not least of which is their detachment from the contemporary experience, they are valuable in their ability to provide some basis in reality, the authors’ experiences as insiders to the rural experience rather than outside observers or urban visitors being particularly useful. Significantly, this rural perspective serves to highlight the potential disparity between urban and rural perceptions, aptly demonstrated by Syd Tyrrell’s recollection of the cacophony of noise in his village, which swiftly shattered the illusions of urban visitors:

It is a fact that some of the Londoners who came to the village for a summer holiday and found their sleep so broken, looked forward to the peace and quiet of their street in Hampstead and a good night’s sleep. That is no exaggeration, for wherever you lived in the village you were not far away from a farmyard or rickyard. Of course we natives were used to the noise.⁷⁸

This small insight into the realities of country living certainly contradicts urban perceptions of a peaceful rural idyll.

This disparity between the rural and urban perspective is particularly apparent in the way in which the role of the shop in idealised depictions of rural life was linked to the Victorians’ changing perception of the child. Indeed, one of the most noticeable elements in the depiction of the ‘charm’ of the village shop was its link to the Victorian child. The depiction of childhood engagement with the village shop by both artists and writers typically focused on portraying them as angelic and innocent, either whilst standing at the shop counter or at the

⁷⁵ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

⁷⁸ Tyrrell, *Syd Tyrrell’s Eydon*, 24-5.

shop window gazing longingly at the enticing display of goods, as Hedley's painting exemplifies (Figure 5.2).⁷⁹ They represent one half of a contrasting image of childhood which was projected in the Victorian period, that of the protected and cherished child of the well-to-do, which stood in stark contrast to the exploited child of the poor.⁸⁰ Some are in the process of shopping, either for themselves as consumers in their own right, or for adults, running errands as proxy shoppers⁸¹ or accompanying them on shopping trips, many of the literary examples published with engaging illustrations or engravings.⁸² In 1876 the popular Scottish artist Erskine Nicol exhibited a painting at the Royal Academy which depicts, as *The Times* reported, 'two little Scotch laddies studying the window of the village shop, with national caution, before going in to lay out their bawbee' (Figure 5.3).⁸³ The arm of the elder boy laid on the younger lad, who was possibly his brother, appears protective, suggesting a fraternal bond that might motivate him to guide the young boy to be cautious in his purchase. This is a reminder that window shopping was not just pleasurable but also a means to gather practical information. This mildly didactic message is mirrored in children's literature, various examples suggesting that the appeal of the village shop meant that it had the potential to be a constant drain on childhood savings.⁸⁴ Nicol's painting would have been comforting to middle-class Victorians keen to celebrate childhood whilst fostering a sense of social propriety, domestic felicity and moral virtue. In a mark of its popularity, Nicol's painting was turned into an engraving by W.H. Simmons in 1878 indicating that the image

⁷⁹ One of the first paintings to reflect this was 'Wishing' by Charles Lidderdale (1831-95), exhibited in March 1864 and earmarked as worthy of 'distinguishing merit' by the prestigious *Art Journal*. Anon, 'British Institution', 88. Neither the painting nor an image of it could be traced.

⁸⁰ Cunningham, H., *The Invention of Childhood* (London: BBC Books, 2006), 140.

⁸¹ Berry has argued, as part of her browse-bargain model of shopping, that 'mundane' shopping for 'essential' items could be conducted by proxy shoppers such as children and servants; Berry, 'Polite Consumption', 379.

⁸² For example: The Editor, 'The Thompsons; Or Scenes in the Country', *Kind Words*, 75 (6th June 1867), 182-3 (includes an engraving depicting two children standing at a village shop counter); Anon, 'A Little Too Clever', *Little Folks* (Aug 1884), 65 (the engraving shows two children in a village shop handing over their mother's beans to the female shopkeeper); Anon, 'The Grocer Fairly Puzzled', *The Children's Treasury and Advocate of the Homeless and Destitute* (1st April 1881), 162 (the engraving shows a group of children playfully teasing their local grocer in his shop).

⁸³ Anon, 'The Royal Academy', *The Times*, 28623 (8th May 1876), 9. A 'bawbee' was a Scottish halfpenny.

⁸⁴ For example: Wray, S.(jr.), 'Two Ways of Spending a Penny', *Sunday School Hive* (November 1883), 167. The poem is a cautionary tale about two boys each spending a penny at a village shop, one being sensible and investing in a trough for his rabbit-hutch, whilst the other recklessly purchases a 'big cigar' which makes him 'as sick as sick could be'; Culf, W.E., 'Truthful Jones: A Tale of a Tuck-Shop', *The Boys Own Paper*, 654 (25th July 1891), 686. This amusing poem emphasises the allure of the village shop, recounting the 'disgust' of a group of school boys who are banned from visiting the village 'tuck-shop' by their schoolmaster, only to catch him in the shop himself.



Fig. 5.3 'Looking out for a safe investment. What shall I buy?', 1876. Oil on canvas. Erskine Nicol.

would have reached beyond the exhibition hall and into the Victorian home.⁸⁵

The Victorian era is widely considered to have been a golden age of childhood. Middle and upper class families, influenced by Queen Victoria's public persona as a devoted wife and mother, strove to live up to their self-imposed ideals of domestic respectability. Indeed, Burnett has claimed that 'the Victorian middle classes were perhaps the most family-minded generation in English history'.⁸⁶ As childhood became something to cherish and protect, a

⁸⁵ The original was sold by Christies on 31st October 2002 along with an artist's proof of the engraving by W.H. Simmons, www.christies.com (date accessed: 12/06/14). Nicol's painting was followed by similar examples such as 'The Village Shop' (1887) by James Charles (1851-1906) which depicts well-dressed, seemingly middle-class children posting a letter and gazing into the window of a village post office and 'The Village Sweet Shop' (1897) by Ralph Hedley (Figure 5.2) which provides an alternative perspective, that of the inside of the shop.

⁸⁶ Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living*, 243.

huge commercial industry emerged to cater for it. The toy industry expanded rapidly, publishers competed to provide a wealth of literature for children and about children, and artists provided paintings which were cloyingly sentimental, following the lead set by artists such as William Collins (1788-1847).⁸⁷

Combining the portrayal of childhood innocence with that of idyllic country scenes was often conscious and contrived, ‘making the point that, as with Maggie Tulliver or David Copperfield, adult experience will destroy this Eden’.⁸⁸ The countryside, since Theocritus’ *Idylls*, had become a symbol for a lost youth, which suggests that it was the representation of childhood which helped to render the rural scene particularly idyllic.⁸⁹ It was therefore the inclusion of children in cultural representations of the village shop which helped to render it ‘charming’ and contributed to its acceptance as part of the rural idyll. A particularly useful demonstration of this is given by Robert Gemmell Hutchison in his late Victorian painting, ‘The Village Shop’ (Figure 5.4), which conveys sentimentality alongside a harsher reality. Like other artists, Hutchison places the children at the window, their neat, well-dressed appearance providing a contrast to the rather bland and gloomy interior and exterior of the shop.⁹⁰ The presence of the children is vital in rendering the scene charming, aided by the affectionate stance of the girls but particularly by the gaze of the children into the window which portrays a sense of wonder at the everyday and the humble which only the innocence of childhood enables.

It was certainly the inclusion of children which gave a painting entitled ‘The Young Customers’ by the illustrator and watercolour artist, Helen Allingham, both aesthetic and commercial value (Figure 5.5). It drew widespread praise from art critics including Ruskin who wrote that it ‘is forever lovely – a thing which I believe Gainsborough would have given one of his own paintings for, old fashioned as red-tipped daisies are, and more precious than rubies’.⁹¹ This was praise indeed from a well-respected, prominent and influential critic who

⁸⁷ Collins had achieved early fame with his depictions of happy and healthy rural children, providing his largely urban audience with escapism from ‘the all too evident horrors of urban squalor which presented themselves on every side’. This type of sentimental depiction of rural children reached the zenith of its expression in the work of Myles Birket Foster (1825-99), imprinting an idyllic fantasy of rural existence on the English consciousness which was only partly countered by the work of social realists. Treble, ‘The Victorian Picture’, 53-4.

⁸⁸ James, L., ‘Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Literature’ in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 71.

⁸⁹ Short, *Imagined Country*, 29.

⁹⁰ A similar type of contrast has been observed by Barrell in paintings by artists such as Gainsborough and Constable who depict the rural poor as ‘happy as the swains of Arcadia’ although there are ‘discreet hints of actuality provided by tattered clothes, heavy boots and agricultural implements’. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 6.

⁹¹ Huish, M.B., *Happy England: As Painted by Helen Allingham, R.W.S. with Memoir and Descriptions* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1903), 51. See also: Anon, ‘The Society of Painters in Water Colours’, *The Athenaeum*, 2480 (8th May 1875), 629; Anon, ‘The Water-Colour Society’, *The Academy*, 158 (15th May 1875), 513; Anon, ‘Fine Arts’, *John Bull*, 2, 840 (15th May 1875), 329; Anon, ‘Society of Painters in Water-colours’, *Art Journal* (July 1875), 214; Anon, ‘The

in 1883 declared that the painting had ‘retained the public admiration’ and become a ‘classic picture, which will have its place among the memorable things in the Art of our time’.⁹² The painting, produced prior to the cottage scenery which made Allingham famous, originated from one of her illustrative drawings for Juliana Ewing’s book, *A Flat Iron for a Farthing*, published in 1872, which depicted a scene in a male shopkeeper’s urban tinshop.⁹³ For her subsequent painting, Allingham ruralised her original sketch, most likely motivated by a desire to appeal to the market for such images; she also made other changes, depicting a toy shop and including an elderly female shopkeeper, which it has been suggested was ‘after a Devonshire cottager’, thus reflecting a general tendency in visual culture to portray the village shopkeeper as old and female.⁹⁴



Fig. 5.4 ‘The Village Shop’. c.1890s. Oil on canvas. Robert Gemmell Hutchison.

International Exhibition’, *The Athenaeum*, 2638 (18th May 1878), 639; Anon, ‘Spring Exhibitions’, *The Athenaeum*, 2893 (7th April 1883), 448; Cartwright, J., ‘Child Faces’, *Atalanta*, 1, 8 (May 1888), 438; Anon, ‘Notes on Art and Archaeology’, *The Academy*, 888 (11th May 1889), 330; Smith, L. T., ‘Women in Contemporary Art: Mrs Allingham’, *Atalanta*, 5, 56 (May 1892), 456-7.

⁹² Huish, *Happy England*, 51.

⁹³ Ewing, J.H., *A Flat Iron for a Farthing or Some Passages in the Life of an only Son* (London: Watergate, 1948, originally published 1872), chapter 11.

⁹⁴ Huish, *Happy England*, 55.



Fig. 5.5 'The Young Customers'. 1875. Watercolour. Helen Allingham. Source: Huish, *Happy England*, 50.

The association between childhood and the village shop in the art of the late Victorian period, particularly its window, which also reinforced the role of the shop as a meeting place for youngsters and not just adults (see Chapter 4), was mirrored in literary representations. Three different pieces entitled 'The Village Shop', all published in different decades, characterised rural retailing in this way, depicting a visit to the shop as a leisure activity for children and emphasising its beguiling character, the window representing a source of amusement.⁹⁵ One of these, a two-chapter story published in *The Quiver* in 1878, describes how children were the first visitors to the village shop after its new owners opened their doors:

First, half a dozen little rough heads and dirty faces appeared at the window, and bright, childish eyes were fixed longingly upon new pink and brown and white sweets, and also

⁹⁵ Anon, 'The Village Shop', *The Quiver*; E.L.A., 'The Village Shop', 166; Anon, 'The Village Shop', *Chambers's Journal of Popular Literature, Science and Arts*, 13, 627 (4th January 1896), 12-14.

upon the tempting cakes and tarts displayed. And, next, a little girl marched in for a pennyworth of fried fish for her own and her mother's dinner.⁹⁶

Notably, unlike many of the cultural representations of the late Victorian period, this clearly depicts working-class children, as Hedley had done in his painting (Figure 5.2), which serves to link the appeal of the shop to an innate innocence found under the 'grubby' and hardened exterior of the children. This fits with the moral emphasis of the story on hard work and diligence, reflecting the religious ethos of the magazine.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it is within children's literature that the association between children and the village shop was most commonplace in the late Victorian period, particularly in relation to leisure and pleasure. In providing a sanitised depiction of childhood, many of the children's periodicals of the mid to late Victorian period catered for a market increasingly concerned about the influence of the sensation fiction of penny dreadfuls. As Marjory Lang has explained, 'for the Victorians literature represented a potent force capable of immense good or harm' therefore there was some concern about the quality of some of the material being made available to the increasingly literate Victorian child by 'a commercial industry specializing in entertaining juvenile publications'.⁹⁷ Magazines like *Kind Words* and *The Girl's Own Paper*, along with its equivalent for boys, filled a gap between these dubious penny weeklies and the more expensive magazines such as *Aunt Judy's Magazine* and *Good Words for the Young*. A useful example of the type of material which aimed to combat this tidal wave of poor quality children's literature, thus appealing to conscientious middle-class parents, is Fred E. Weatherly's book *Among the Daisies*. It contains a series of vignettes illustrated by M. Ellen Edwards, including one entitled 'The Little Purchases'. Contrived to appeal to children, the text and accompanying illustration (Figure 5.6) are cloyingly sentimental, drawing on what had become stereotypical imagery, including children at the shop window and the elderly female shopkeeper, whose apparent kindness is established by the phrase 'dear old Mary Candy'.⁹⁸ In its depiction of abundance and temptation, the poem is also rather like an innocent version of Christina Rossetti's "Goblin Market" (see Chapter 3). Significantly this was not meant to represent the experience of a typical rural child. These are children who have 'fourpence' to spend on frivolities, a treat which would have been out of the reach of most working-class children. Indeed, the whole book strives to portray an idealistic image of a middle-class childhood in the countryside.

It is apparent from the abundance of imagery which places children at the shop window that it had some symbolic significance. Demonstrating this most usefully is a very short fictional piece published in 1886 in Dr. Barnardo's children's magazine, *Our Darlings*, two engravings by two

⁹⁶ Anon, 'The Village Shop', *The Quiver*, 335.

⁹⁷ Lang, 'Childhood's Champions', 17.

⁹⁸ Weatherly, F.E., *Among the Daisies* (London, 1891).

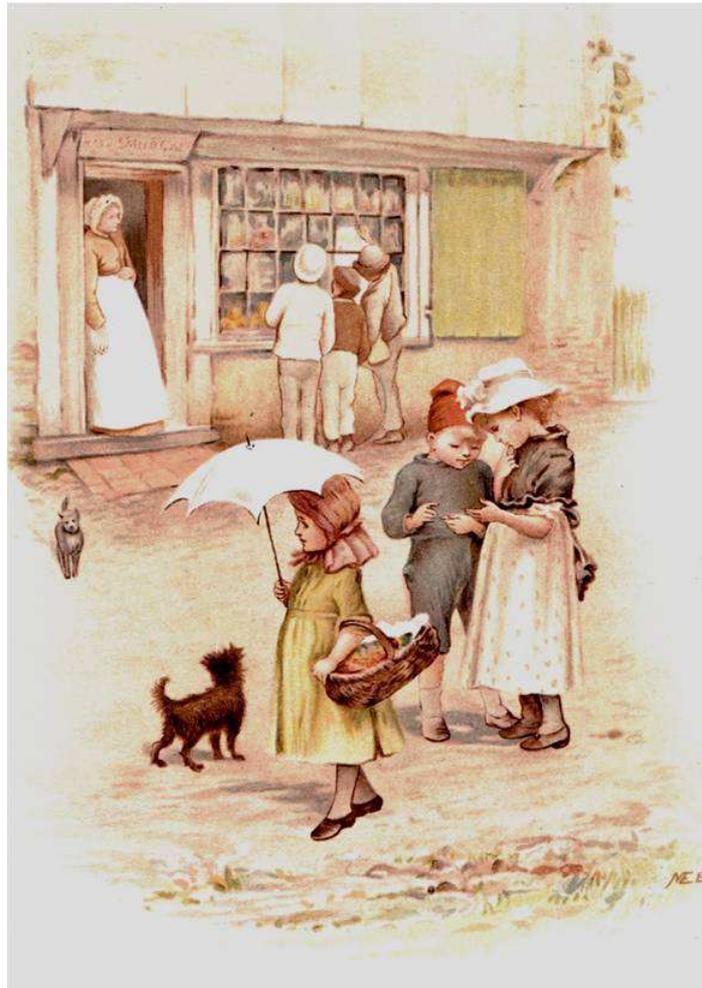


Fig. 5.6 'The Little Purchases'. Colour illustration. M. Ellen Edwards. Source: Weatherly, *Among the Daisies*.

different artists (Figure 5.7) published alongside the narrative. It is suggested that it is only the innocence and naivety of youth which imbues the village shop with appeal, such fascination being eroded in a child's mind as they grow up and become exposed to wider influences. The shop and its window eventually fails to trigger intrigue and loses its 'brightness'.⁹⁹ The shop is therefore a symbol of innocence which only the innocent can fully understand, making the point that its appeal is rooted in childhood perceptions. It is certainly significant that the artist responsible for the more detailed engraving interpreted the shop as old-fashioned, run by an older woman with trade conducted out of the window. The depiction of an unglazed window harks back to a mode of selling prevalent in the pre-industrial period which serves to highlight the very real possibility that in depicting childhood both authors and artists drew on their own memories, thus regressing to the past for a suitable image.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Anon, 'The Village Shop', *Our Darlings*, 257 (1st October 1886), 419.

¹⁰⁰ Stobart's analysis of shop inventories has shown that during the eighteenth century the shop window increasingly became an enclosed space in which to display goods rather than to sell



Fig. 5.7 Engravings of 'The Village Shop'. L.L. and Durrin. Source: Anon, 'The Village Shop', *Our Darlings*, 257 (1st October 1886), 419, 421.

Conversely, however, the enticement of the variety of goods on display at the village shop hints at modernity. Not only do they represent a link to the outside world, urban markets, foreign lands and empire but also to a consumer society faced with an increasing abundance of goods and the kind of desire and temptation made explicit in Rosetti's "Goblin Market" (see Chapter 3). Again, the shop window seems to have had some symbolic significance in this regard. The village shop provided tangible access to modernity and progress within a rural community and therefore it can be seen figuratively as a window on a 'world of goods'. It represents the juxtaposition of the old and the new, of tradition and modernity, of rural and urban. This was a period in which city-centre department stores were leading the way in the adoption of plate glass, facilitated by the abolition of the glass tax in 1851, the same year that crowds were dazzled by the display of the new techniques in the creation of the Crystal Palace erected for the Great Exhibition. These large panes replaced the small panes of traditional crown glass windows, a visible mark of

them. However, it is also worth noting that unglazed windows also remained well into the twentieth century, particularly in shops selling fresh food. Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 118-9.

progress in what Armstrong describes as ‘the era of public glass’.¹⁰¹ This was a change reflected on by Reverend P.H. Ditchfield who aligned such windows with the ‘old-fashioned, half-timbered shops’ which he describes as ‘doomed’.¹⁰² Urban society, familiar with the enticements of a modern, large-paned urban shop window, would have been sensitive to the contrast that the old style of shop window provided and the gap between the urban and rural shopping experience.¹⁰³ So, whilst the village shop window was used allegorically to emphasise childhood fascination with modernity, to urban audiences it also represented the past. The placement of the village shop in a bygone era reflects a wider cultural movement seeking to represent a traditional rural past as the basis of English national identity (see Chapter 6).

Figuratively, the village shop window also represented a barrier. The goods in the window tempt children to enter the shop yet they are typically depicted as seeing but not touching. This is used to great effect by various artists using different perspectives, either from inside or outside the shop. On one side of the window was a commercial space filled with an abundance of goods, representing the corrupting influence of modern urban life, whilst on the other the children remain physically and safely in the rural, their leisurely musings conveying a slow pace of life, being typically depicted in stasis, either sitting or leaning. However, some writers portrayed the act of purchasing by a child as entirely acceptable, in fact preferable when compared to the urban experience. For example, a writer for *The Academy*, who claimed the vogue for sensation in children’s literature was echoed in the type of extravagant toys found in large urban emporiums, likened the beauty of simplicity in Beatrix Potter’s books¹⁰⁴ to the act of a child choosing a toy at a village shop:

Go to some large emporium, and there you will find, in perambulators, bears as large as your cab-driver...Here you will see none of that eager fingering that takes place at the village shop, that lengthy process of selection and final approbation of delight...No, the children walk here, as crowds move at an exhibition, quashed to a dull amaze.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰¹ Armstrong, I., *Victorian Glassworlds: Glass Culture and the Imagination 1830-1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1. The Crystal Palace erected for the Great Exhibition in 1851 dazzled visitors with its display of the new techniques which allowed large sheets of glass to be used.

¹⁰² Ditchfield, *Vanishing England*, 28.

¹⁰³ It is important to note that many urban shops, particularly those in provincial towns and the less fashionable areas of cities, also retained the old style of window during the period.

¹⁰⁴ Beatrix Potter produced a children’s book about village retailing, *The Tale of Ginger and Pickles* (1909), which is a cautionary tale about credit in the retail trade and yet was also visually appealing, about a third of the illustrations including the shop window. It had positive reviews, thus hinting at the strength of sentimental imagery in diluting mildly critical narrative. The popularity of Potter’s books would have ensured that it was reasonably well disseminated.

¹⁰⁵ Tennant, P., ‘Children’s Literature’, *The Academy: Illustrated Supplement*, 1753 (9th December 1905), 4.

Childhood engagement with the village shop is therefore suggested to epitomise the values threatened by modernity. It is an image deemed beautiful in its simplicity, the experience of a rural child, delighted in the purchase of a cheap, rustic toy, being somehow more aesthetically pleasing to the middle-class Victorian mind than the urban child's submergence in a world of commodities which produces toys which 'are outside the scale of their world'.¹⁰⁶

By the end of the century the village shop had undoubtedly become part of mainstream literary and visual culture, the enthusiastic reception given to artistic depictions by both the public and the critics suggesting that it had been rendered part of the picturesque rural landscape. This was significant as it was the picturesque, Reay suggests, which 'provided a literal or virtual site for leisure and pleasure in momentary escape from modernity'.¹⁰⁷ This is reflected in the appearance of village shops in photographs of village scenes used on postcards. The advent of rural tourism and the practice of weekending, facilitated by the expansion of the railway, provided a ready market for such imagery. The sender of one such example, showing a village shop in Kersey in Suffolk, declared on the back, 'I thought this rather pretty so am sending it' (Figure 5.8). A genre of shop photographs also emerged in which a shopkeeper would typically be shown standing in front of their shop, some of which were also turned into postcards (see Figures 3.5, 4.8, 6.3 and 6.4). It was a trend noted by Cox and Dannehl who reason that 'shopkeepers and the buying public, each in their own way and for their own purposes, wanted visual images of the village and its shop, apparently seeing them as part of the acceptable rural scenery'.¹⁰⁸

The appeal of such images to the wider general public, fuelled by an urban middle-class need for reassuring images of the countryside, emphasises the fundamental shift in attitudes towards rural retailing which had occurred by the Edwardian period. Yet this resulted in the presentation of a narrow interpretation of the village shop and its keeper which drew on tradition and nostalgia rather than a desire to present a balanced version of reality. Whilst the imagery did not go as far as to present a pre-industrial image, the collective impression is one which emphasises the past or a sense of timelessness. The rural location linked the village shop to notions of a rural idyll and therefore to perceptions of a peaceful, slow pace of life, whilst in comparison to urban living and urban retailing it appeared quaint, old-fashioned and appealing. Essentially, what was presented was a sanitised, idealistic version of reality, both in the depiction of a rural idyll, which represented safety from the corrupting influence of urban life, and in the depiction of children as rosy-cheeked, healthy, happy and contented innocents. This was not only the antithesis of the grim reality for many Victorian children, which industrialisation and urbanisation had fuelled, but,

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Reay, *Rural Englands*, 194.

¹⁰⁸ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 37.



Fig. 5.8 Postcard of 'Kersey Village, near Hadley'. 1903. Source: Author.

crucially, it took little account of the reality for poorer rural children which, of course, was far from idyllic.¹⁰⁹ Generally, Victorian artists fought shy of such subjects for the simple reason that there was little or no market for 'unpleasant' paintings. Indeed, as O'Neill points out, 'one can hardly condemn an artist for preferring to make a living rather than starve in a garret'.¹¹⁰ Mingay also observes that even those who observed rather than romanticised the countryside, such as Trollope and Cobbett, presented the social realities to varying degrees as they too 'aimed at an urban audience, one which liked to read about the countryside but did not want to have its enjoyment spoiled by too strong an infusion of brutal reality'.¹¹¹ Therefore, whilst artists like Hutchison highlight how the use of children can bridge the gap between a realistic style and the widespread lucrative appeal of sentimental and charming imagery, a swathe of Victorian writers and artists merely responded to demand by producing material which reflected an ideal rather than the reality.

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Faed's 1879 painting of a destitute veteran and his children, in which a more realistic style is used, appears to have been an exception, the stark differences between rich and poor being rendered explicit (see Chapter 3)

¹¹⁰ George Moore, *Modern Painting* (1893) as quoted in Reay, *Rural Englands*, 179-80; O'Neill, R., *The Art of Victorian Childhood* (Bristol: Parragon, 1996), 6-7. In their quest to make a living, artists produced portraits for the wealthier members of society whilst also working as slaves to the market for cheap, sentimental imagery, many finding it far harder to succeed at producing works which depicted the kind of social realism which drew in the crowds and popularised their work.

¹¹¹ Mingay, 'Introduction' in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 3-4.

The collectively misleading result is typified by the fact that the children being depicted were not typically those of the rural working class; they were most often idealistic representations of rural middle-class children created to appeal to an urban middle-class audience.¹¹² They were contrived to be ‘safe’ images as the children are not shown to be transcending the boundaries of middle-class morality, they are depicted as demure, obedient and sombre, thus reflecting middle class mores. The interaction between the child and the village shop can be seen to represent a transitional point between childhood and adulthood or innocence and worldliness, reflecting perennial anxieties about children as potentially corruptible by outside influences. Even those who portrayed the child interacting with the village shopkeeper as a consumer in their own right, most prominent in children’s literature, were mildly didactic in their attempts to influence the adolescent mind or packaged their narrative in a way that suggests that the child was taking their first steps to becoming a consummate and competent consumer.

It is also worth reflecting on the validity of the widespread characterisation of the village shopkeeper as an elderly female, often a widow, which is suggestive of bygone days. Winstanley has acknowledged the establishment of the female shopkeeper as a stereotype, either ‘the wife of a labourer or a penurious widow’ and observes that ‘some writers automatically refer to the shopkeeper as ‘she’.¹¹³ Yet this is not as misleading as it might appear. The cultural imagery helps to draw attention to the role of female relatives in the running of shops, which often went unrecorded in official records. Moreover, whilst the findings of the previous chapter show that the gender bias was not a fair reflection of the reality, when it is considered that the cultural imagery typically depicted a general shop and post office, either separately or together, then it becomes understandable as it has been shown that most female village shopkeepers engaged in such trade.

Chartres has also claimed that general shopkeeping was a ‘commonly female’ trade and that ‘for at least the first half of our period one gains the impression that it was an occupation developed by or chosen for the widow’.¹¹⁴ Whilst this ‘impression’ generally remains unsubstantiated, Lawson’s study of Preston shopkeepers has shown that there was a heavy concentration of over-forties in general shopkeeping, a trade accessible to older people, and whilst most general shopkeepers were men, the women tended to be widows or spinsters.¹¹⁵ However, Collins, who has explored the significance of gender in detail, evaluating the impact of retail change on the gender of shopkeepers and their employees, has shown that by 1900 female shopkeepers were not just widows but single and married women too, albeit limited to a

¹¹² Exceptions include Ralph Hedley’s painting (Figure 5.2) and Anon, ‘The Village Shop’, *The Quiver*, 335, which both depict working-class children.

¹¹³ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 199.

¹¹⁴ Chartres, ‘Country Tradesmen’, 308.

¹¹⁵ Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’, 313-5.

particular number of trades.¹¹⁶ Therefore whilst the trope of the old woman selling sweets and frivolities to children is misleading in its gender bias, it seems a fair reflection of the independent female shopkeeper. Similarly, whilst the humble nature of the trade is a rather narrow interpretation of village shopkeeping, which could range from ‘the pathetic display of goods in a front-room window to the thriving business not unlike a primitive department store’, the image does at least serve to highlight the kind of small-scale retailing which often went unacknowledged in official records.¹¹⁷ Such modest trade was recalled by Clarence Henry Warren who described how Mrs Cummings sold home-made bulls’-eyes from her back door.¹¹⁸ Nonetheless, in presenting a sentimental image both artists and writers fell short of reflecting the desperation and repetition of such behaviour by impoverished women hoping to generate a few pennies of extra income, as highlighted by the case of Jane Forster (see Chapter 3).¹¹⁹

For urban consumers of culture who had no experience of village life such consistent imagery would have influenced their perception of the reality, the powerful impact demonstrated by Arnold Bennett’s acknowledgement in 1911 that his knowledge of the village shop was gleaned from ‘novels’.¹²⁰ Indeed, this profound transformation in the cultural image of the village shopkeeper from exploiter of the poor to humble stalwart of the community warrants further analysis below.

‘Everybody’s friend in the parish’: the benevolent village shopkeeper

In the mid to late Victorian period, the village shop and its keeper were not only increasingly regarded as charming, the result of a wider idealisation of the countryside, but their specific place and value in the context of their local community was also subject to some reconsideration. In the previous chapter this was demonstrated in relation to their social role, yet, as will become clear, their commercial role received the same treatment. For example, in the 1860 article published in *The Leisure Hour*, the shop is not only portrayed as a useful feature of village life but the author also sought to dispel any idea that the shopkeeper exploited his position:

¹¹⁶ Collins, ‘Fixed-shop Retailing’, ii.

¹¹⁷ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 200. Evidence of the more substantial rural retailer has led Mitchell to question whether it is fair to regard the village shop as on the margins of retailing. Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 78.

¹¹⁸ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 28. See also H.U.U., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 11.

¹¹⁹ Flora Thompson touches on this, albeit in a sentimental mode, in her descriptions of Mrs Macey, one of Miss Lane’s postwomen, who sold sweets and undertook dressmaking from her home to maintain subsistence for herself and her son whilst her husband was in prison. Also, in referring to the ‘lesser shops around the green’ she describes an ‘old dame’ who sold ‘penny plates of cooked prunes and rice’ and ‘sticky toffee’ to village children in the evenings. Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 453-4, 464, 504-507.

¹²⁰ Bennett, ‘Watling Street’, 217.

Seeing that Mr Potter is such a tremendous monopolist, one might imagine him a kind of village ogre, devouring all and sundry that came in his way, and fattening upon the spoils of his fellows. Never was a greater mistake than that would be. Of course, the proprietor of the village shop takes care of himself, but it is generally the fact that he does business at smaller profit than his rival in the city, and with infinitely more regard to the welfare of his customers.¹²¹

Utilising the carnivorous metaphor found in the negative imagery of earlier in the century (see Chapter 3), the author likens the shopkeeper to an ‘ogre’ for dramatic effect before suggesting that the opposite was true, that the shopkeeper could be considerate to his customers. The author concludes that ‘in the long-run, the master of the village shop is pretty sure to grow rich’ but suggests that ‘we’, thereby appealing directly to the reader for concurrence, should ‘not grudge the old man his competence and independence, for nothing is more certain than that he has worked hard to win them’.¹²² Whilst the author’s observations undoubtedly involve a degree of conjecture, they are useful nonetheless in demonstrating that the rural shopkeeper was beginning to invoke some regard from middle-class society for their role as retailers in their community.¹²³

Towards the end of the century, praise for the shopkeeper was more overt. For example, a short piece entitled ‘The Village Shop’, published in 1889 in *The Graphic*, suggested that it was the credit offered and the patience of the shopkeeper which kept the rural poor from ruin: ‘the village shop will generally stand his friend to the very furthest stretch of good trading’.¹²⁴ Some authors went further, the shopkeeper not only portrayed as kind but also functioning in the narrative as a form of moral compass in relation to the use of credit by rural customers. For example, the story, ‘A Rich Woman’, mentioned earlier, centres on a shop and post office in Winds Haven run by the heroine, Chrystal Joyce, the shopkeeper’s daughter. She is revealed to be kind, generous and well-liked, surpassing the call of duty in her dealings with local people. One of the engravings which accompanied the story depicts a scene in the opening chapter in which Chrystal goes beyond her obligations as postmistress to ensure that the letter of a poor old lady

¹²¹ Anon, ‘A Village Shop’, 606.

¹²² Ibid., 607.

¹²³ See also: Holbeach, ‘Shoemakers’ Village’, *Argosy*, 3, 1 (December 1866), 68-9; Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 417. Thompson hints at changes to the way village shopkeepers’ profits were perceived, providing a useful interpretation of the local reputation of shopkeepers, her insider’s view of the rural community hinting at the perceptions of those they actually served.

¹²⁴ E.L.A., ‘The Village Shop’, 166. The established stereotype of a retail monopoly is utilised here; the village shop, it is suggested, was ‘often the only representative of commerce for several long miles round of rough country roads’. However, rather than presenting this as disadvantageous to the local community, the fact that it is there at all is suggested to be cause for some gratitude.

reaches its destination (Figure 5.9). Yet she does not let her kindness cloud her common sense; she assists the worthy poor whilst denying credit to those who might abuse it, thereby demonstrating a fair and sensible approach to retailing: 'Chrystal was always able to afford credit to those whom misfortune had overthrown; though she was nevertheless ready to apply the strictest trade principles to those to whom credit would have been but a delusion and a snare'.¹²⁵ By controlling and guiding her customers in their use of credit, Chrystal acts as a maternal or authoritative figure, despite her young age. It is significant that the female village shopkeeper or shopgirl continued to be portrayed as a relatively strong, independent woman during the late Victorian period, as had been the case earlier in the century (see Chapter 4). What had changed was their characterisation which shifted from gossipy, meddling and unfeminine to kind and benevolent. Interestingly, this strength of character contrasts with the portrayal of the sexual vulnerability of urban shopgirls, which evolved from earlier caricatures of flirtatious behaviour (used as a sales strategy).¹²⁶

This fundamental change in attitudes towards the rural retailer came at a time when the debate on the plight of the agricultural labourer was beginning to lose its earlier intensity. There was still concern for the state of the rural poor and social reform continued to be a topical issue, which was reflected in contemporary literature¹²⁷, but the spirited campaign begun in the preceding century to address the plight of the working man was seen in many ways to have achieved its goal. It had found success as part of the political agenda with three Reform Acts being passed and literacy levels had almost doubled, popular demand for education having increased and a national system of schooling established. The trade union movement had also boosted the position of the agricultural worker.¹²⁸ More specifically, rural working-class living standards were perceived to have improved, a survey conducted on behalf of the medical officer of the Privy

¹²⁵ Anon, 'A Rich Woman', 690.

¹²⁶ For example, in Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* the heroine, a 'beautiful little milliner', is pursued by the rich middle-class Mr Carson who was 'quite infatuated by her'. Gaskell, E., *Mary Barton: A Tale of Manchester Life* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996, originally published 1848), 80-81. For more information see: Sanders, L., *Consuming Fantasies: Labor, Leisure, and the London shopgirl, 1880-1920* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006); Walsh, 'Shops, Shopping', 162, 166; Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 112; Cox, P., and Hopley, A., *Shopgirls: The True Story of Life Behind the Counter* (London: Hutchinson, 2014), chapter 3.

¹²⁷ For example: a range of parliamentary papers on agriculture continued to be published in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period. E.g. BPP, *Reports of the Royal Commission on the Employment of Children, Young Persons and Women in Agriculture*, First Report, PP XVII (1867-68); Second Report, PP XIII (1868-9); Third Report, PP XIII (1870); BPP, *Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour*, PP XXXV (1893-4). Also, The *Daily News* survey of 1891, conducted by George Millin, demonstrates that concern still existed in liberal circles. It sought information on the living conditions and opinions of agricultural labourers, which, following publication, generated huge interest and an avalanche of letters. Bellamy, E. and Williamson, T. (eds.), *Life in the Victorian Village: The Daily News Survey of 1891: Volume 1* (London: Caliban, 1999), 1.

¹²⁸ Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 111-121.



Fig. 5.9 Engraving entitled “‘Oh, the weary trudge I've had,” she cried’. R. French. Source: Anon, ‘A Rich Woman’, 497.¹²⁹

Council in 1863 on the diets of the labouring classes showing that the agricultural labourer was generally better fed than indoor workers.¹³⁰ Moreover, *The Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour*, published in 1893, whilst acknowledging geographical differences, suggested that the purchasing power of the labourer had increased because the price of provisions had lowered and shorter hours meant more leisure-time to devote to an allotment.¹³¹ Economic historians generally agree that real wages increased significantly from 1851 and food prices declined faster than the overall cost of living, a depression in agriculture in the late Victorian period crippling farmers and landowners which diverted the attention of the governing classes.¹³²

¹²⁹ The initial of the engraver is difficult to determine from the engraving and could be ‘H’ rather than ‘R’. The same engraving was also used to illustrate a short story published in a children’s magazine the following year in which a shopkeeper’s daughter is kind to an old lady who had come to post a letter, urging her to ‘step in a bit and rest yourself, I’ll pop the letter in the box and see it goes safely.’ Anon, ‘The Post-Office’, *The Children’s Treasury and Advocate of the Homeless and Destitute*, 309 (27th November 1880), 566.

¹³⁰ BPP, *Sixth report of the Medical Officer of the Privy Council*, PP XXVIII (1864); Burnett, ‘Country Diet’, 558-9.

¹³¹ BPP, *Reports of the Royal Commission on Labour* as quoted in Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, 130.

¹³² Boyer, G.R., ‘Living Standards, 1860-1939’ in Floud, R. and Johnson, P. (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain: Volume II: Economic Maturity, 1860-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 280.

The change in the material condition of the rural labourer was noted by various contemporary observers, including Thomas Hardy, who believed that progress was marked by the enrichment of the material and intellectual culture of the rural working class.¹³³ For others it was improvements in the ability of the rural poor to cater for their more immediate needs which was most noteworthy. A small book written in 1887 by a village shopkeeper in Stansted Mountfitchet, Essex, which traced the history of his shop, reflects on the lower prices of a range of goods which would have made them more accessible to the working class and improved their diet:

Since 1787 nearly all articles sold by the grocer, excepting provisions, have become infinitely cheaper,...while a few years since rancid butter and greatly decayed cheese were bought eagerly, now they may go begging, showing the improvement in the position of the working classes.¹³⁴

Writing a year later, the author of an article published in *Blackwoods* claimed that the village labourer could purchase basic necessities like food and clothing 20 to 30 percent cheaper than in 1870, enjoy 'butcher's meat four times a-week...a tin of preserved salmon or a box of sardines' and was therefore 'a wholly different man from what he was in the last generation'.¹³⁵ Such improvements in the standard of living directly fed into changes in the way both shop and shopkeeper were viewed as the erosion of anxieties paved the way for their more sympathetic and sentimental representation.

Widespread recognition of such improvements was also suggested to have extended to rural labourers themselves. In 1894 a politically satirical penny monthly magazine, which purported to have had 'a chat with an agricultural labourer', claimed that they believed themselves far better off than during their childhoods, having benefitted from higher wages, cheaper prices for ordinary commodities and access to allotments.¹³⁶ Their monotonous diet had certainly been dramatically improved by the end of the century as more meat, tea, coffee and cheese could be purchased and new products came within reach such as tinned goods and margarine.¹³⁷ This is

¹³³ Hardy wrote of his observations to Rider Haggard in 1902: 'Their present life is almost without exception one of comfort, if the most ordinary thrift is observed'. Philip, *Victorian Life*, 131.

¹³⁴ Green, *Two Hundred Years' History*, 9.

¹³⁵ Kebbel, T.E., 'The English Peasantry', *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 144, 876 (October 1888), 504-5.

¹³⁶ Anon, 'Something for Villagers: A Chat with an Agricultural Labourer', *Picture Politics: A Penny Popular Monthly*, 7, No.6 (October 1894), 4. The allotment movement came about as a result of concern about the pace of rural migration which led to legislation during the 1880s and 1890s designed to give the labourer a 'stake in the soil', Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 108. See also: Burchardt, J., *The Allotment Movement in England, 1793-1873* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2002).

¹³⁷ Burnett, *A History of the Cost of Living*, 265-6; Mingay, *Rural Life*, 88; Burnett, 'Country Diet', 561-4; Barty-King, H., *Making Provision: A Centenary History of the Provision Trade* (London: Quiller Press, 1986), chapter 3. Various contemporary writers reflected on the increase in tinned goods,

apparent when comparing the credit purchases made at George Hooper's bakery shop in Windrush at mid century with those made at the shop in the mid-1880s, by then a grocery and drapery run by his daughter, Elizabeth, assisted by her sister, Ann (Table 5.1).¹³⁸ Despite having just thirty-five credit customers during 1885 and 1886, which is a fraction of the number which their father had thirty years before, Elizabeth had a similar proportion of customers classified as rural poor. What is particularly significant is that the rural poor were purchasing over 100 different types of goods from her shop which was over three times the number bought from her father.¹³⁹ Whilst the expansion in the range of stock clearly reflected a move away from the bakery trade, it is possible to identify items which were new, such as powdered egg, borax, magnesia and tinned meats, some of which were bought by various labouring families.¹⁴⁰ The word 'tin' or 'tinned' was actually listed frequently in relation to goods such as milk, coffee, mustard, beef, mutton, salmon and sardines. The range of certain items like soap also increased to include 'cold w', 'scented', 'honey' and 'toilet' and regional and branded products appear such as Yorkshire sauce or Yorkshire relish, Redman tobacco, Epp's cocoa powder and Osbourne biscuits, which were one of the first semi-sweet varieties of biscuit to find mass favour (Figure 5.10).¹⁴¹ Indeed, such biscuits were a sign of progress noted by the Essex shopkeeper: 'Early this century the Biscuit business was confined to two or three expensive kinds, now we have only to name such a house as "Huntley and Palmer" to show what an enormous trade is done in this direction, and from threepence per pound upwards'.¹⁴² This reflects Winstanley's claim that by the Edwardian period 'branded and packeted grocery goods were relatively common' in village

one female author suggesting in 1892 that it had helped to make meat a more regular part of the rural working-class diet although others argued that it was a poor substitute and could lead to ptomaine and verdigris poisoning. Yonge, C.M., 'An Old Woman's Outlook', *The Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Members of the English Church*, 501 (November 1892), 564; A Pastoral Observer, 'The Food of the Rustic', *Country Life Illustrated*, 8, 188 (11th August 1900), 173.

¹³⁸ Census records and various trade directories indicate that George Hooper may have died sometime between 1851 and 1854 as by 1856 his son, Thomas, had taken over the business. When Thomas died in 1861 his sister, Elizabeth, took over the bakery and by the 1881 census she was listed as a grocer and draper, assisted by her sister, Ann. Census of England: Gloucestershire: Windrush (1851-81); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856), 390; *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (Kelly and Co, 1863), 376; *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (Kelly and Co, 1870), 676; *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (Kelly and Co, 1879), 787.

¹³⁹ GAR: D1522/2/8. All credit purchases by the thirty-five customers were analysed for the years 1885-6.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.* For example, in 1885 George Bishop, a young married agricultural labourer, bought a tin of beef in April for 14d, a tin of salmon in July for 9d and another in August for the same price along with another tin of beef at the slightly higher price of 16d.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.* For example, Yorkshire sauce was bought by Daniel Paget, a gardener, Redman tobacco was bought by the blacksmith, John Wheeler, Epp's cocoa was bought by William Jackson, a sawyer, and Osbourne biscuits were bought by the schoolmistress, Miss Rawlings; The Huntley & Palmers Collection, www.huntleyandpalmers.org.uk (date accessed: 24/01/14).

¹⁴² Green, *Two Hundred Years' History*, 10.

Table 5.1 Comparison of customer base and range of goods purchased at Windrush village shop, Gloucestershire in the mid and late nineteenth century by occupation

Occupation	GEORGE HOOPER Windrush (1848-54)				ELIZABETH HOOPER Windrush (1885-6)				Change in no. of goods purchased	
	Customers		Goods purchased		Customers		Goods purchased		No.	%
	No.	%	No. of types	% of total (50)	No.	%	No. of types	% of total (216)		
Agricultural labourers	72	46.2	30	60	13	37.1	116	54	+86	+287
Other labouring/service	4	2.6	14	28	5	14.3	27	13	+13	+93
Paupers	1	0.6	8	16	0	0.0	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Total rural poor	77	49.4	32	64	18	51.4	121	56	+89	+278
Tradesmen and craftsmen	30	19.2	32	64	5	14.3	123	57	+91	+284
Farmers	8	5.1	30	60	1	2.9	3	1	-27	-84
Elite, gentry & clergymen	2	1.3	11	22	2	5.7	29	13	+18	+164
Public service & professional	2	1.3	3	6	3	8.6	100	46	+97	+3233
Independent	1	<0.7	2	4	0	0.0	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
<i>None given or cannot decipher</i>	1	<0.7	2	4	0	0.0	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>
Unidentified customers	35	22.4	26	52	6	17.1	109	51	+83	+319
Total	156	100.0	50	<i>n/a</i>	35	100.0	216	<i>n/a</i>	+166	+332

Source: GAR: D1522/2/6-8; Census of England: Gloucestershire: Windrush (1851 and 1881).

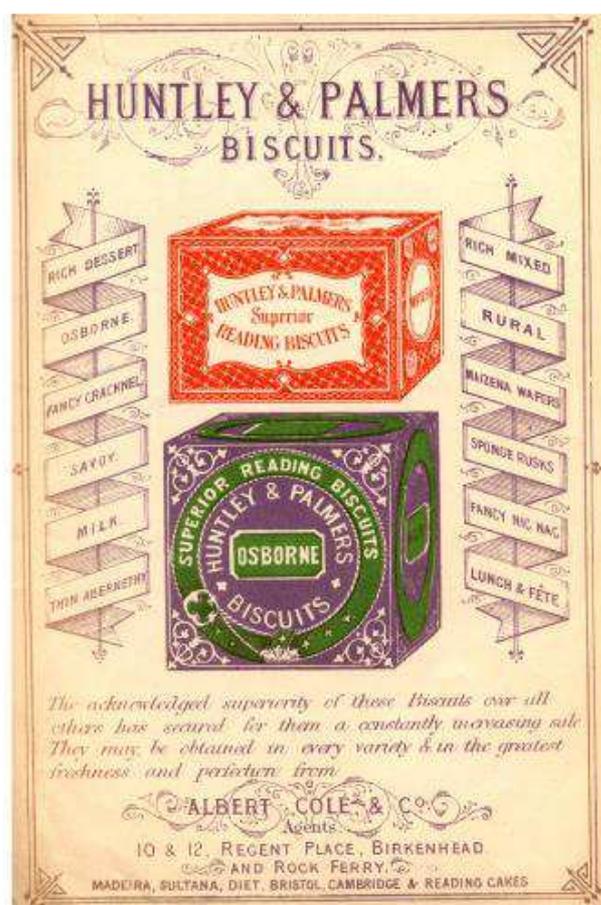


Fig. 5.10 Advertising leaflet for ‘Superior Reading Biscuits’ including Osborne biscuits, overprinted with Birkenhead retailer’s details. c.1860-1880. Source: Image courtesy of Reading Borough Council (Reading Museum Service).

shops.¹⁴³ In addition to these new goods, the prices for some necessities had remained stable or declined. For example, in 1853 George Hooper had sold cheese for between 7d and 8.5d per pound and sugar for between 5d and 6d yet by 1882 Elizabeth was selling them for 6-9d and 3-4d per pound respectively.¹⁴⁴ This appears to support claims published in *Blackwoods* in 1888 that the labourer could purchase basic necessities 20 to 30 percent cheaper than in the 1860s.¹⁴⁵

Contributing to this diminishing concern for the rural poor was a shift in the unease of wealthy society from the agricultural labourer to the worker in industry, who, as Barrell suggests, ‘seems to carry the burden of England’s economic progress, and...seems capable of threatening it by indiscipline, idleness, or revolt’.¹⁴⁶ The attention of the governing classes turned to the new urban underclass and the rising trade union movement whilst social reformers shifted their gaze from the agricultural labourer, perceived by many to be in relative contentment, to the immediate plight of the industrial worker and the urban poor and the increasingly unsanitary conditions in which they lived.¹⁴⁷ Tellingly, the Hodge stereotype was reconstructed in the last quarter of the century as ‘a more sympathetic approach to the rural population began to erode the stereotyping of the labourer’.¹⁴⁸ The sentimentalisation of the rural peasantry, which formed part of the rural-urban narrative, had a powerful influence on wider perceptions of rural life.

Small signs that the groundswell of opinion was changing provides some indication that the climate was right to foster a change in attitudes towards rural retailing, particularly when considered alongside evidence of its absorption into the concept of a rural idyll. As the agricultural depression deepened, rural retailers began to elicit sympathy, along with other rural tradesmen and women, from those sympathetic to the suffering of farmers and landowners, as a short article in *The County Gentleman* of 16th January 1886 reveals: ‘Other trades have suffered in sympathy with the impoverished husbandmen...the whole mass of manufacturers and tradespeople, through the diminished purchasing power of one of the most numerous classes of the community’.¹⁴⁹ This suggests that perceptions of a common suffering led to the retailer being aligned with the fortunes of agriculture, thus eroding previous notions of it being an ‘unnatural’ part of the rural economy and landscape and providing some provenance for its emergence in landscape painting. Notably, the readiness of the rural shopkeeper to cater for the needs of the poor began to draw praise, many authors re-characterising them as benefactors rather than

¹⁴³ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 206.

¹⁴⁴ GAR: D1522/2/7-8.

¹⁴⁵ Kebbel, ‘The English Peasantry’, 504.

¹⁴⁶ Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, 32.

¹⁴⁷ For example: philanthropists and social reformers such as Charles Booth (1840-1916) and Benjamin Seebohm Rowntree (1871-1954) investigated poverty in urban areas at the end of the nineteenth century.

¹⁴⁸ Freeman, ‘The Agricultural Labourer’, 176.

¹⁴⁹ Anon, ‘A Minister for Agriculture’, *The County Gentleman: A Sporting Gazette and Agricultural Journal*, 1236 (16th January 1886), 70.

exploiters. For example, in a serialised story published in *The Quiver* in 1883, a grocer and postmaster, Edward Bright, who is described as ‘pleasant-mannered and sensible’, purchases all the tin ware in the basket of a ‘poor travelling girl’ who enters his shop and also invites her to rest and have some tea.¹⁵⁰ As in previous examples, the portrayal of the village shopkeeper’s character reflects the religious, evangelical ethos of the magazine which was focused on the teaching of morality and the promotion of faith.¹⁵¹

Evidence of the attitude of village shopkeepers towards the rural poor appears to align with their more complementary characterisation in the mid to late Victorian period. They expressed sympathy for the plight of the rural poor rather than a desire to exploit them as hinted at in a poem entitled ‘on the poor’, published in 1825 by the amateur poet, Richard Gardner, keeper of a general village shop in Clifton upon Teme in Worcestershire. He suggests that the rural poor should have access to allotments and that charity should begin at home.¹⁵² A benevolent attitude can also be found in the writings of the rural shopkeeper, Hardy Woolley, who urged the readers of his trade manuals to have ‘a care for the unfortunate’.¹⁵³ Similarly, a nineteenth-century Scottish village draper, who published his autobiography in 1876, expressed sympathy for the poor labourers which he saw at work in the fields during his long walks on Saturday afternoons, particularly the women who he claimed were ‘very much underpaid’.¹⁵⁴ He hints at the shift in attention from the rural to the urban worker, expressing a desire to ‘awaken sympathy’ for rural workers, thereby suggesting that it had waned. His sympathies also led to action as whilst his autobiography reveals nothing of his day to day dealings with the rural poor at his shop, it does reveal that he ‘engaged, on Sabbath evenings, in Mission School work’ and supported the establishment of what turned out to be a successful Penny Savings Bank which it was hoped would provide ‘moral benefit’ and encourage ‘provident and industrial habits’, his respectable standing in the community leading to his nomination as secretary.¹⁵⁵ This is also further evidence of the central role of the shopkeeper within the rural community (see Chapter 4)

A slightly less subjective view of the village shopkeeper is provided by William Arthur, a Methodist minister and writer, who produced a biography of Samuel Budgett, whose wholesale grocery business, H.H. & S. Budgett, based in Bristol, was founded from the humble origins of

¹⁵⁰ Anon, ‘Doubly Blind’, *The Quiver*, 18, 877 (January 1883), 420-21. See also: Tallentyre, ‘Country Notes’, 449.

¹⁵¹ Brake, L. and Demoor, M. (eds.), *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism* (Gent and London: Academia Press and The British Library, 2009), 100-1, 525.

¹⁵² Gardner, R., ‘on the poor’ in Gardner, *Poems by Richard Gardner*, 18.

¹⁵³ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 16. See also: Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 463.

¹⁵⁴ Anon, *The History of a Village Shopkeeper*, 150-1.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-7.

village retailing (Figure 5.11).¹⁵⁶ Budgett is introduced as a man who ran contrary to the popular image of the village shopkeeper, he ‘had always a heart for a friend, a hand for the poor’, his Christian character held up as the key to his benevolence.¹⁵⁷ In order to emphasise his kind nature, Arthur describes a scene, suggested to be typical, in which the merchant stops his ‘phaeton’ in order to offer a lift to ‘a woman carrying a bundle’ who ‘is deposited in Bristol, with the present of some pretty little book’.¹⁵⁸ A review of Arthur’s book neatly summarises the merchant’s character:

Localizing his philanthropy...inculcating habits of frugality and self-help – aiding men to rise – spreading employment...teaching, preaching, visiting, relieving, helping, mediating, advising, aiming every day to leave that part of the world which came under his influence better and happier than he found it.¹⁵⁹



Fig. 5.11 Frontispiece portrait of Samuel Budgett (1794-1851). Unknown artist. Arthur, *The Successful Merchant*.

¹⁵⁶ The book was a bestseller in England and abroad, already in its 43rd edition by 1878, making Budgett well known, particularly, it seems likely, amongst those who Arthur hoped to influence, ‘men from the counting house or the shop’. Arthur, *The Successful Merchant*, 9.

¹⁵⁷ Arthur, *The Successful Merchant*, 46.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁵⁹ Anon, Art 3: The Successful Merchant: Memoirs of the Life of Samuel Budgett of Bristol, *The North British Review*, 37, 74 (November 1862), 270-2.

The impact of this benevolence on Budgett's local reputation was observed by Arthur when the merchant died in May 1851. His death 'moved an entire neighbourhood, and wrung individual hearts', there being 'about two hundred men' stood outside his door on the day of his funeral suggesting that he was mourned by a great many people.¹⁶⁰ The *Bristol Times* reported that 'rarely...has a neighbourhood suffered a greater loss, in the death of a man, than Kingswood in the decease of Mr Budgett, whose charity was unbounded, and who distributed with discrimination and liberality, and without ostentation, fully £2,000 a year from his own pocket'.¹⁶¹ Budgett's life, whilst exceptional, demonstrates that a retailer could be successful without being grasping and, conversely, that philanthropy need not risk a shopkeeper's livelihood.

It is significant that the sympathies of the village shopkeeper appear to have aligned more closely with the working man than the prosperous middle class, contradicting their characterisation early in the century as exploitative and grasping. This aligns with Hosgood's observations of small urban shopkeepers who 'identified with, and defended, working-class values'.¹⁶² This might be explained by the typically humble background of the rural retailer, used to hard work and long hours although this does not mean to suggest they considered themselves social equals. Many village shopkeepers, particularly those who had more substantial businesses, would have considered themselves above the working man due to their independence in the work place and their alignment, both socially and economically, with trade and farming (see Chapter 4). This could cause friction, as suggested in Flora Thompson's *Candleford Green*; despite the generous nature of the grocer's wife, Laura reveals that the family was 'not liked by all' because 'some said they had ideas above their station in life'.¹⁶³ However, like the gentry, landowners and farmers, many village shopkeepers felt obliged to make charitable contributions to the community which set them apart from those who benefited from them. In Elmdon in Essex, for example, they gave 'in money and in kind over and above what the law demanded of them, their contributions varying according to their income'.¹⁶⁴ Each of the shopkeepers gave five shillings as a 'voluntary' subscription to the church cleaning fund and 'in return, like the Squire, they expected a measure of respect and they saw themselves as being in a different category from the rest of the villagers'.¹⁶⁵

Yet it is in the trading practices of village shopkeepers, specifically their management of the credit accounts of their customers, that profound change can be detected in the cultural image of

¹⁶⁰ Arthur, *The Successful Merchant*, 15.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 18. Samuel Budgett became as well known for his philanthropy as for his success in trade as reflected in his entry in Stephen, L. (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography Volume VII: Brown-Burthogge* (London, 1886), 226.

¹⁶² Hosgood, 'The "Pigmies of Commerce"', 453.

¹⁶³ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 463.

¹⁶⁴ Robin, *Elmdon*, 163.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 163.

the village shopkeeper, noticeably eroding the prevailing negative association between the village shop and the working-class burden of debt (see Chapter 3). By the end of the century the credit available at the village shop was not universally condemned as detrimental to the poor and, in fact, was often portrayed as a useful form of temporary social relief. An early example appeared in Dickens' *Household Words* in 1859 entitled 'The Clergyman's Wife', a short story in which the character of Mr Snuffles, keeper of a general shop, is described as the only friend of the poor of the parish, due to his patience in the granting of credit:

Snuffles is everybody's friend in the parish...I have often wondered what the poor of Lightlands would do without him, or without some such other general shop-keeper in his stead; for the truth is, that Mr Snuffles, although scrupulous to a halfpennyworth of tobacco in making out the weekly bills of his customers, will always give trust.¹⁶⁶

It is the labourers' low wages coupled with their poor management of money which the author suggests to be the cause of debt at the village shop, leading to a reduced quality of life and a cycle of neglect within rural working-class families. The credit offered by a patient and sympathetic shopkeeper is suggested to be an important means of temporarily assisting the poor, which is particularly relevant if the inconsistency of agricultural wages and the reliance on seasonal work or 'harvest money' to pay off debts is taken into account. By extending credit, it is the village shopkeeper who is deemed to be taking all the risk in providing such families with some hope; as Snuffles remarks to the clergyman's wife, "A man must have a good hope, ma'am, or he can't do anything".¹⁶⁷ The shopkeeper is therefore figuratively repositioned to stand alongside the rural poor rather than against them, being recast as the labourer's friend rather than his enemy. This reiterates the point that it was attitudes towards rural retailing which had changed rather than underlying perceptions of what constituted a village shop or how the retailer conducted business (e.g. granting credit). The justification of Snuffles' opinions by a member of the local middle-class, in this case a clergyman's wife, appears to be a hint at wider middle-class sympathies, in line with the ethos of Dickens' magazine. What is significant is the suggestion that, despite deserving some sympathy, the rural poor needed to shoulder some of the responsibility for the management of their income.

Whilst the portrayal of the village shopkeeper as a compassionate friend to the poor, always willing to give credit, breaks from the literary tradition of earlier in the century, the reality changed rather less. Since the early modern period, rural retailers had been playing a vital role in ensuring local prosperity, assisting in the healthy functioning of localised systems of credit and

¹⁶⁶ Anon, 'The Clergyman's Wife', 198. See also: Southworth, E D E N, 'All Alone', *London Reader*, 4, 94-5 (25th February and 4th March 1865), 487-90, 533-4.

¹⁶⁷ Anon, 'The Clergyman's Wife', 199.

maintaining flexibility in transactions. As Alexander asserts, by extending credit to the poorer members of society, tradesmen provided a ‘valuable, if imperfect, social service’.¹⁶⁸ Indeed, credit had a uniquely important role to play in a rural community in helping to alleviate the temporary problems associated with a seasonal agricultural economy, either in terms of shortages or excessive commitment, the cyclical fluctuations in yields and prices affecting agrarian liquidity. It was an integral part of the local economy, the *will* to lend, which made it possible, of more significance than the identity of the borrowers.¹⁶⁹ Credit therefore gave the rural poor assurances that they could maintain their living standards when times were hard, suggested in *Candleford Green* when Laura describes the conscious use of credit for the good of the poor by the grocer’s wife: ‘the poor had cause to bless her, for their credit there in bad times was unlimited, and many families had a standing debt on her books that both debtor and credit knew could never be paid’.¹⁷⁰ This role is also implied in the writings of Reverend Richard Cobbold of Wortham in Suffolk, who claims that the poor in his parish could ‘find a little trust’ at the small general shop of Mr Thurlow, which was near the village workhouse.¹⁷¹

There is certainly plenty of evidence to suggest that village shopkeepers were patient in their management of the credit accounts of their poorer customers despite the risk that this exposed them to. Some allowed their poorer customers to defer payment until a point in the year when they had a reasonable prospect of making extra money, such as harvest time, as recalled by Leonard Coombs, whose father, Charles, took over the running of his family’s grocery shop in Ickham, Kent, in 1896:¹⁷²

Then, of course, where there was real necessity with a few of the local labouring people during the year, very poor families, or families who had met with disaster and had been hit by two or three deaths, so he used to say, ‘Now, don’t pay me. Don’t worry. When hop picking comes and you’ve earned your extra money then, then pay me’.¹⁷³

Some also allowed customers to continue making purchases on credit even when they were clearly sliding into debt or outstanding debt was already high. Rather than withdraw credit to force payment, they merely drew a line under it, submitted a bill in the hope of payment and began a new tally as George Hooper did in March 1849 for Joseph Dossett, an agricultural

¹⁶⁸ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 184. The positive role which small retailers could play in facilitating access to credit is recognised by various historians. For example: Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 199; Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 51.

¹⁶⁹ Holderness, B.A., ‘Credit in English Rural Society before the Nineteenth Century, with special reference to the period 1650-1720’, *The Agricultural History Review*, 24, 2 (1976), 108.

¹⁷⁰ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 463.

¹⁷¹ Fletcher, *The Biography of a Victorian Village*, 106.

¹⁷² Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 202.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 212.

labourer, who owed £2 2 6; thereafter payments went against the new balance leaving the old debt unpaid which enabled Dossett to concentrate on attempting to keep on top of the new balance at which he was rather unsuccessful, the old debt remaining unpaid and growing larger.¹⁷⁴ Even in cases where it might appear that credit was withdrawn, it is possible that this was not the case. For example, Isaac Paget, a gardener who used the Windrush shop later in the century, by then run by Elizabeth Hooper, stopped visiting at the end of February 1885 owing 19s 1½d but a bill was only delivered three months later suggesting that Elizabeth may have held off during this time in the hope that trade would recommence.¹⁷⁵ The bill triggered Paget to begin using the shop again although no payments were made at that time and for the rest of the year payments were only made to clear the new balance. At the end of the year the gardener stopped using the shop again, leaving the old balance unpaid. As Elizabeth allowed Paget to stop and start his account without any payment towards his old debt, it appears that she had not withdrawn credit and that it was the customer that was in control, perhaps going elsewhere for his groceries in the intervening period. She was eventually rewarded by a payment of 10s in August 1886 which halved the old debt, the rest settled in 1887 when Mr Paget began to use the shop regularly again.¹⁷⁶ Whilst it is impossible to know if Elizabeth was deliberately tolerant or merely frustrated, her approach demonstrates that it could be in the shopkeeper's best interests to be patient when dealing with customers as in this case it secured payment of the old debt and future custom. Martin draws a similar conclusion in a study of a Devon community, suggesting that whilst village shop ledgers evidence 'a sadly familiar pattern' of families sliding into debt and struggling to pay it off for many years, they also do 'credit to the leniency of the shopkeeper' who allows small payments to be made, sometimes never seeing cash payments on an account, waiting years to be paid and without seeming to withdraw credit or take further proceedings to recover the debt.¹⁷⁷ This appears to echo the behaviour of the village shopkeeper, Thomas Turner, in the previous century thus demonstrating a degree of continuity, pragmatism likely to have remained an overriding consideration for most shopkeepers.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁴ GAR: D1522/2/8. By August his new debt had grown to £1 6 4 and although £1 was paid this still added 6s 4d to the old debt making it £2 8 10. By November another new tally had reached £2 5 3 and a bill was delivered prompting a payment of £1 16 0 adding a further £ 1 3 9 to the old debt which therefore totalled £3 12 6 by the end of the year. In an analysis of George Hooper's account books, these sorts of customers were categorised as 'poor' at debt management (see Chapter 3).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Martin, *The Shearers and the Shorn*, 93.

¹⁷⁸ For evidence of Turner's attitude towards the rural poor see Turner, *The Diary of a Village Shopkeeper*, xviii, 16, 88-9, 97, 166, 219, 254, 314, 341, 368, 403, 410. For further evidence in relation to the attitude of the eighteenth-century village shopkeeper see: Vaughan-Lewis, *The Village Shop*, 10.

As well as being portrayed as patient in their dealings with the rural poor in late Victorian literary culture, attention also began to be paid to their flexibility, particular value placed on their willingness to accept goods or labour. The article published in *The Leisure Hour* in 1860, for example, describes Mr Potter's role in facilitating the sale of local produce for local people or purchasing such goods to sell in his shop which provided 'money for the customer's behoof', suggested to be 'beneficial to all parties'.¹⁷⁹ Shop ledgers provide a wide range of evidence for this practice, it being well recognised and long-established.¹⁸⁰ For example, earlier in the century, George Hooper allowed some customers to work in order to reduce their debt and he also accepted apples, barley and pigs; Rebecca Course was supplied with flour, malt, wheat, barley, peas and pigs and in Great Chart in Kent the grocer and butcher, Charles Small, took pigs.¹⁸¹ Such practices continued into the late Victorian period, Elizabeth Hooper allowing customers to work for her and taking produce, such as a crop of potatoes, in exchange for a reduction on outstanding debt.¹⁸² As there was always a balance to be paid this was not strictly bartering, it was a system of part payment or semi-barter which Walter Rose recalls was named 'chop'.¹⁸³ This sort of neighbourhood exchange was relatively commonplace in nineteenth-century rural England, either due to a shortage of cash, a common complaint of Thomas Turner and well documented in rural areas after 1815, which Reed suggests led people to being 'reduced to barter', or a desire to deal with 'a member of the network rather than an outsider, even though this meant that they made less on the transaction'.¹⁸⁴ Such reciprocal trade helped the rural poor in their management of a credit account which was the means of obtaining the kind of necessities which could not be produced at home, as noted in *Candleford Green*: 'The problem facing the lower-paid workers was not so much how to provide food for themselves and their families as how to obtain the hundred and one other things, such as clothing, boots, fuel, bedding and crockery ware, which had to be

¹⁷⁹ Anon, 'A Village Shop', 607. See also: Anon, 'A Little Too Clever', 11.

¹⁸⁰ For example, William Wood accepted payments in kind during the eighteenth century, Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 155. See also: Bailey, 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food'.

¹⁸¹ GAR: D1522/2/6-7; CBS: Q/DA/96/3; KHLC: Q/CI/296/13. For example, one of George Hooper's most regular customers, Stephen Lock, an agricultural labourer, was given a deduction on his bill of 3s 9d. 'for work' in October 1853.

¹⁸² GAR: D1522/2/8. For example, John Phipps, an agricultural labourer killed pigs, cut trees and undertook other 'work'. The crop of potatoes was accepted from Mrs Garlick, an elderly ex-labourer who lived alone, which gave a £3 reduction her outstanding debt of £5 9s 5d. She clearly relied on such flexibility to keep her debt under control as despite making regular £2 payments on account during 1885 her debt grew consistently from £2 11s 9 ½d at the start of the year to £5 9s 5d by the end of the year, the potatoes being offered in the following February. See also: Martin, *The Shearers and the Shorn*, 92, 95.

¹⁸³ Rose, *Good Neighbours*, 55.

¹⁸⁴ Reed, M., "'Gnawing It Out": A New Look at Economic Relations in Nineteenth-Century Rural England', *Rural History*, 1, 1 (1990), 90.

paid for in cash'.¹⁸⁵ In this regard, the willingness of a shopkeeper to be flexible in the management of their credit accounts was of paramount importance to the rural poor.

Some shopkeepers went further, allowing customers to draw cash, presumably in times of need, both George Hooper and his daughter Elizabeth loaning small sums, typically to those who were good credit customers.¹⁸⁶ Such loans were useful in providing temporary financial assistance, a safety net in times of hardship. They relied on trust, the customer forging such a relationship with the shopkeeper by effectively managing their credit account over a period of time. The role of the shopkeeper as moneylender or unofficial banker formed part of a system of borrowing and lending which permeated rural society at all levels and was an integral part of the local economy.¹⁸⁷ In an analysis of the role of credit in English rural society in the pre-industrial period, Holderness specifically identifies country shopkeepers as important in facilitating many of the smaller loans which represent a significant element of the system of credit in rural communities.¹⁸⁸

Nevertheless, whilst the village shopkeeper played a useful role in rural communities by providing flexible access to credit, it being commonplace for accounts to be balanced using a combination of goods, services, work and cash, their motivation is less clear.¹⁸⁹ Hardy Woolley's advice to his readers is somewhat revealing. He claims that 'the country store keeper is a necessity, and not the least important man in his locality, were it not for such, in many remote parts of the country, the poor, who necessarily buy from hand to mouth, would feel the effects of scarcity even in times of abundance'.¹⁹⁰ Yet he also cautions shopkeepers to 'never lend more than you can afford to loose [sic], thus a mutual interest springs up, and the position is secure'.¹⁹¹ This is a reminder, as Hosgood has noted, that shopkeepers 'may not have been prompted solely by humanitarian concerns'.¹⁹² Credit was the basis of shopkeepers' power and status in working-class communities and whilst in some cases it may well reflect the benevolent nature of the shopkeeper or indicate the establishment of trust, honesty and flexibility between retailer and customer in their trading relationship, it is just as likely to have stemmed from obligation.¹⁹³ An Essex draper acknowledged the quandary: 'We are all obliged to live by the goodwill of our neighbours, and if we were not to accommodate them by giving credit, and very often we cannot

¹⁸⁵ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 433.

¹⁸⁶ GAR: D1522/2/6-8. For example, George Hooper lent Stephen Lock four shillings in May 1849. The decision to lend this particular customer money may have been based on the fact that he was a good credit customer, typically paying off his account in full.

¹⁸⁷ Holderness, 'Credit in English Rural Society', 108. For more on the role of the shopkeeper as moneylender see: Fowler, 'Changes in Provincial Retail Practice', 45-6.

¹⁸⁸ Holderness, 'Credit in English Rural Society', 107.

¹⁸⁹ Reed, 'Gnawing It Out', 86.

¹⁹⁰ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 4.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 47.

¹⁹² Hosgood, 'The "Pigmies of Commerce"', 442.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

do it with safety, we should get that ill-will, which would be detrimental to our trade'.¹⁹⁴ Therefore, whilst credit was not typically granted indiscriminately, there being a need to mitigate risk, shopkeepers may well have felt compelled to take some risk. Such obligation has been noted by Alexander who states, 'it is unquestionably true that small shopkeepers were pressed by the working classes for credit facilities'.¹⁹⁵

Having granted credit, the shopkeeper may then have been obliged to be patient and flexible in dealing with the debt, as already indicated and as Walter Rose recalled:

The boy at the village school was taught that the debtor was servant to the creditor. But on leaving school, if he should happen eventually to take up trade in the village, he found the principle reversed...Having rendered his account for work done or goods supplied, he found it next to impossible to get the money. In despair he had at last to fall into line with the time-honoured method of taking, instead of money, the particular commodity that the debtor was able to supply.¹⁹⁶

Reciprocal neighbourhood exchange had its benefits yet it was also risky for the shopkeeper as it reduced cash flow. Rebecca Course's trading relationship with Tom Carr, a middle-aged agricultural labourer with whom she had dealt for many years, is particularly revealing as she appears to have accepted whatever he had to offer against his debt. During the 1830s either he or his wife typically visited the bakery twice a week to collect two loaves each time but, unlike some of the other labouring families, they never made any regular payments on account.¹⁹⁷ By October 1839, when they appear to have ceased using the shop, their account stood at £26 6 9³/₄ against which the following had been given:

1834	cash	1	0	0
	26 bushels potatoes @ 9d	0	19	6
1835	12 bushels wheat @ 6s	3	12	0
1836	pig	3	0	0
1838	[<i>unknown</i>]	4	0	0
	wheat and barley	<u>4</u>	<u>14</u>	<u>6</u>
		17	6	0

¹⁹⁴ *Recovery of Small Debts* as quoted in Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 183. The same dilemma was also expressed in the seventeenth century by William Stout, a Lancaster grocer. Stout, W., [Harland, J. (ed.)], *Autobiography of William Stout of Lancaster, 1665-1752* (London, 1851), 96.

¹⁹⁵ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 184. See also: Kent, 'Small Businessmen', 51-2.

¹⁹⁶ Rose, *Good Neighbours*, 54-5.

¹⁹⁷ CBS: Q/DA/96/3. Based on the fifteen months of transactions recorded in the ledger between July 1838 and September 1839 inclusive. It is only the totals given in the rendering of the account that reveal the history of their trading relationship.

Another pig was provided in 1840, the year after they ceased using the shop, which was valued at £2 5 0 thereby making the total paid £19 11 0 and leaving a balance due of £6 15 9³/₄.¹⁹⁸ It is unclear whether Rebecca Course finally withdrew credit or the customer merely stopped using her shop; however, as she did not total the account until it ceased, apparently not feeling compelled at any time to submit a bill for payment, it seems that she was either content with this arrangement or was resigned to this method of dealing with this customer. Many retailers had accounts largely based on the kind of reciprocal neighbourhood exchange which Walter Rose calls ‘gnawing it out’, such contra transactions, he suggests, often going on ‘for years without any account being rendered’ citing the example of two parties reaching settlement after fourteen years ‘by tossing for a sovereign between them’.¹⁹⁹ This was also observed by Syd Tyrrell whose father engaged in the practice: ‘We were not exceptional, for at the time many village tradesmen were in the same position; they bought and sold to one another for years without any settlement’.²⁰⁰ The management of credit certainly appears to have been a process of continual negotiation although Rebecca Course’s seemingly relaxed attitude may well have contributed to the cash flow problems which ultimately led to her insolvency at the end of 1840.

This risk of insolvency began to gain recognition as the century progressed, which is demonstrated in the story of ‘The Clergyman’s Wife’, the compassion of Mr Snuffles, who is described as ‘everybody’s friend in the parish’, suggested to have come at a price: ‘Of course he frequently makes bad debts by so constantly listening to the necessitous cry of, “Have patience with me, and I will pay thee all”’.²⁰¹ The shopkeeper is therefore portrayed as a person who might rank good relations with neighbours over a bottom line, despite a typically modest income meaning that they lived in constant dread of bankruptcy. Other authors highlighted the irresponsible use of credit by some customers, making a clear distinction between honest and dishonest customers and the moral and immoral use of credit. For example, in a serialised story entitled ‘All Alone’, by the widely-read American novelist and mild social reformer, E D E N Southworth, the necessitous use of credit by Amy, a doctor’s widow, is contrasted with the shame of recklessly incurred debt.²⁰² This is demonstrated in a scene in which her son, Owen, disagrees with her about allowing a customer to purchase items on credit in their newly opened shop. The widow urges her son to be charitable: “My love, I must! I ask credit, Owen, and I am

¹⁹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹⁹ Rose, *Good Neighbours*, 55.

²⁰⁰ Tyrrell, S., *A Countryman’s Tale* (London: Constable and Company, 1973), 233.

²⁰¹ Anon, ‘The Clergyman’s Wife’, 198.

²⁰² The serialised story by E D E N Southworth was published in 153 chapters as ‘All Alone’ in *London Reader* from June 1864 to July 1865 and a shorter version of 102 chapters entitled ‘Left Alone’ was published in *London Journal* over the same period (published again in 1887). Both were penny weekly magazines, the latter being one of the most popular and widely read magazines aimed at the lower-middle and working classes.

not refused. Therefore when credit is asked of me, I must give it.”²⁰³ Yet Owen is more astute, recognising that credit could be recklessly abused and was as likely to cause the bankruptcy of a shopkeeper as the ruin of a customer:

Yes, mother, but we are on other people’s books for the necessaries of life that we cannot do without. And we pay as fast as we can. But this woman, Mrs Ball, mother, runs in debt for luxuries like otto of roses and bear’s grease, and rouge, and pearl powder, and she seldom or never pays.²⁰⁴

As Owen is eventually proven right about ‘Mrs Ball’, the story is didactic, attempting to highlight that the abuse of credit had consequences for shopkeepers and the wider community. It serves to demonstrate how the prevailing interpretation of debtors as victims of misfortune was beginning to be challenged by mid-century, the process of reform transforming the debtors’ prison from ‘an asylum capable of protecting its inmates from the full wrath of their creditors into a more punitive institution intended to exact retribution for economic misbehaviour’.²⁰⁵ Such a fundamental change in attitudes meant that the creditor was beginning to draw sympathy away from the debtor, which helped to transform the way in which shopkeepers were viewed.

The reality was that shopkeepers had few options when dealing with debtors. The restriction or withdrawal of credit was employed by some shopkeepers but it was a risky tactic as it might prompt the customer to go elsewhere for their goods, leaving the shopkeeper with little prospect of recouping the debt.²⁰⁶ Legal action was typically a last resort after the shopkeeper had exhausted their patience as it was not a practical option for the smallest debts. As The Select Committee on the Recovery of Small Debts reported, ‘every witness whom the committee have examined agrees in stating, that no prudent tradesman ever thinks it for his interest to sue for any debts below £15’.²⁰⁷ It is therefore unsurprising that Hardy Woolley cautioned his readers about such debt: ‘small accounts are very likely to deceive the inexperienced, they may go on until they become a formidable amount in the aggregate’.²⁰⁸ As tradesmen often had ledgers filled overwhelmingly with small debts, which might add up to large

²⁰³ Southworth, ‘All Alone’, 551.

²⁰⁴ Ibid.

²⁰⁵ Finn, *The Character of Credit*, 154. Thackeray’s satirical novel, *Vanity Fair*, is also representative of a growing critique of commodity culture and the system of credit, the reckless behaviour of Becky Sharp and Rawdon Crawley highlighting the negative consequences of the abuse of the system of credit. Thackeray, W.M., *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2001, originally published 1847-8).

²⁰⁶ Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 156.

²⁰⁷ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 177-9.

²⁰⁸ Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 33.

sums, the risk is clear and it seems fair to assume that some customers would have exploited this to their advantage.²⁰⁹ Clarence Henry Warren recalled his father's frustrations:

I could hear him adding up the ledgers aloud and holding one-sided conversations with the various people whose names were written across the tops of the pages with bright green ink... 'You didn't know I saw you coming out of the Black Lion yesterday, did you Jane? Oh yes, and it wasn't cabbages you had under your shawl, either!'²¹⁰

Warren's father chose to vent his frustration in private but on occasion he had to speak sternly with certain defaulting customers in his office:

I heard him say: 'You're a bad lot, Polly: a real bad lot. I shall have to tell the police of this.' But from what I have since learned, I have no doubt that when she was out of the way he went straight back to his desk, drew his scratchy pen through her account, and sighed.²¹¹

He clearly disliked being taken for a fool but his son ultimately believed that he was a charitable man, his actions demonstrating that rural shopkeepers, like their urban counterparts, were forced to write off bad debts. Indeed, Muldrew suggests that the charitable forgiveness of the debts of the poor had become an important part of the culture of credit during the early modern period.²¹² Maintaining a healthy credit ledger was a delicate balancing act and success would have necessitated great tact and diplomacy, the intimacy of a rural community only accentuating the importance of getting the approach right. Shopkeepers needed to cajole customers whilst maintaining collegial relations.

Ultimately, persistent problems in managing book debt, which is well documented, put pressure on cash flow and therefore a shopkeeper's ability to maintain their own debt with suppliers thus exposing them to the risk of insolvency.²¹³ Bankruptcy records, which detail numerous failed attempts at village retailing, are certainly testament to the precarious nature of rural shopkeeping.²¹⁴ Richard Gilbert, a grocer and cheesemonger in Iver, Buckinghamshire,

²⁰⁹ Alexander claims that 'tradesmen's accounts receivables ledgers were filled overwhelmingly with small debts', one London hatter having half of his accounts represented by sums under £5. Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 177.

²¹⁰ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 54.

²¹¹ Ibid.

²¹² Muldrew, *The Economy of Obligation*, 304.

²¹³ An early example is the seventeenth-century village shopkeeper, Roger Lowe, who had problems managing unpaid bills and spent many days debt-collecting rather than keeping his shop open. Davis, *A History of Shopping*, 150-1.

²¹⁴ For example: KHLC: Q/CI (Court of Insolvent Debtors); CBS: Q/DA (Accounts of Insolvent Debtors). Such records reveal a fair representation by village shopkeepers alongside urban retailers, many of the surviving ledgers showing inattentive bookkeeping and almost illegible writing which may have contributed to their downfall, a point noted in Kent, 'Small Businessmen', 49.

records the day he ‘surrendered’ as 2nd October 1834, taking the trouble to categorise his book debts, which totalled £38 16 7, according to the likelihood of recovery. Those listed as ‘bad’ or ‘doubtful’ amounted to £31 4 6 (80.4%) and included individuals who are recorded as having died, gone bankrupt, entered the workhouse or left the area which compares to just £7 12 1 (19.6%) listed as ‘good’.²¹⁵ This reflects the earlier practice of recording debts in inventories as ‘sperate’ (hopeful) and ‘desperate’. In 1840 Rebecca Course also ceased trading, her ledger revealing that she was owed over £800 by 144 different customers that year.²¹⁶ This correlates with Kent’s claim that ‘most small businessmen had a significant number of their accounts receivable unpaid at the time of their insolvency’.²¹⁷ Only a third of her customers appear to have settled their accounts, representing just a fifth of the total outstanding, which strongly indicates that her bad debts are likely to have contributed to her downfall.²¹⁸ Significantly, of the ninety-four customers who do not appear to have settled their accounts, fifty-six were classified as rural poor (60%), who collectively accounted for nearly three-quarters of the bad debt, which was far in excess of their 44 percent representation in the customer base of the shop (see Table 3.3 in Chapter 3).²¹⁹ Astonishingly, one customer was allowed to draw goods on credit seemingly without making any payments at all as between December 1838 and August 1839 James Read, an agricultural labourer with a young family, used Rebecca’s shop 109 times and took goods worth £19 4 0 which merely added to historic debt going back many years of £10-16-11½ thus leaving a total of over thirty pounds ‘due to the Estate of RC’.²²⁰ So, the debts of the rural poor, whose custom was often relied upon, could certainly contribute to the downfall of village shopkeepers

²¹⁵ CBS: Q/DA/33/4, account book of Richard Gilbert of Iver, Grocer and Cheesemonger (1833-4).

²¹⁶ CBS: Q DA/96/3. Her insolvency led to her being sent to Aylesbury Gaol. There were 167 customers listed in the ledger, twenty-three of which had ceased to use the shop prior to 1840 and had settled their accounts, leaving 144 who had either stopped using the shop and still owed money or continued to use the shop that year, their accounts ceasing either before or at insolvency. Collectively they owed approximately £813. Anon, ‘The Court for Relief of Insolvent Debtors: Wednesday the 31st day of July 1844’, *The London Gazette*, 20369 (2nd August 1844), 2726-7, www.thegazette.co.uk (date accessed: 09/04/14). Charles Small also went insolvent in the 1840s, being committed to Maidstone Prison, but the poor quality of his book-keeping precludes any estimate of his book debt. Anon, ‘At the Court-House, at Maidstone...’, *The London Gazette*, 20148 (7th October 1842), 2741, www.thegazette.co.uk (date accessed: 09/04/14).

²¹⁷ Kent, ‘Small Businessmen’, 52.

²¹⁸ CBS: Q/DA/96/3. Only fifty customers (35%) appear to have paid what they owed, totalling approximately £151 (19%). The remaining ninety-four (65%) do not appear to have subsequently settled their accounts, these bad debts totalling approximately £662 (81%). As no payment dates are recorded it is impossible to determine exactly which debts were paid or outstanding at insolvency or, indeed, those which were paid thereafter; however, as paid accounts were crossed through, it has been assumed that those not crossed out were unpaid at the time of insolvency and remained so thereafter.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* The fifty-six customers accounted for approximately £451 of the total bad debt of £662 (68%).

²²⁰ *Ibid.*

which might subsequently endanger other traders with whom they dealt. The shopkeeper and other family members shared the burden of worry over the risks that were taken, such anxiety apparent from an entry in George Hooper's ledger by his daughter, Ann, who wrote rather tellingly, 'here is more in this book than will ever will be paid', which betrays a hint of resignation.²²¹ Ultimately credit played a complex role in rural communities and whilst it was capable of providing relief, recognition was emerging in the second half of the century of its capacity to cause financial ruin, not just to the recipient but, significantly, also to the extender.²²²

Conclusion

Contemporary attitudes towards rural retailing appear to have undergone significant alteration during the second half of the nineteenth century. Whilst negative imagery continued to be published, it increasingly appeared counter-cultural, overshadowed by a notable increase in sentimental representations of the village shop. The stereotype of a multifarious monopoly persisted, although recast in a positive light, therefore whilst perceptions of its nature had not changed, attitudes towards the place and role of the shopkeeper in the rural community had. Change occurred at a time when the debate on the plight of the agricultural labourer was losing its earlier intensity and perceptions of a common suffering during the agricultural depression had led to the retailer being aligned with the fortunes of agriculture, thus eroding previous notions of it being an 'unnatural' part of the rural economy. It was spearheaded by the pastoral impulse of the urban middle classes who demonstrated an increasingly rural-nostalgic vision. Their taste for sentimental or idealistic depictions of rural life, which stems from an unease with the pace of change in the English landscape, appears to have led to the village shop being treated more sympathetically. As it began to be portrayed as part of an idyllic rural life and childhood so its characteristics became imbued with an appeal and the association of the shopkeeper with the exploitation of the rural poor was reconsidered. They were recast as kind, benevolent and patient, praised for an ability to facilitate access to goods via flexible systems of credit, which was deemed useful as a form of temporary social relief. Particular recognition was given to the risks which they undertook in the granting of credit which formed part of a wider change in attitudes towards debt and debtors. This is corroborated by evidence from shop ledgers as well as by their claims that they felt compassion for the poor working man, that there was a distinction between the worthy and unworthy poor and that they had a right to make a modest living. Moreover, despite believing that their trade was hard, precarious and only able to support a humble life, many were

²²¹ GAR: D1522/2/6.

²²² The credit question sparked considerable debate in trade journals and books and a growing concern amongst commentators was fuelled by the annual reports of the Inspector-General in Bankruptcy. Hosgood, "The "Pigmies of Commerce"", 442.

involved in local benevolent organisations or claimed to have undertaken deliberate acts of charity. Significantly, this indicates some consistency in the attitude and behaviour of the village shopkeeper; it was the cultural image that had changed, not the shopkeeper. Yet, ascertaining their motivation and the extent to which they felt obligated to act in this way is more difficult. Reliant on the rural working-class for their survival, many clearly struggled to manage their book debt successfully, being only too aware of their precarious position and the risk of insolvency which threatened to propel them towards the plight of the majority of those they served. Consequently their behaviour is likely to have rested primarily on their individual characteristics and circumstances.

As this more sympathetic portrayal of rural retailing was largely a middle-class cultural construct it directly contrasts with the image projected in the first half of the century which was rooted in polite society. Nevertheless, it remained an urban perspective on rural life and communities, artists and writers often supercilious in their portrayal of the rural experience, appraising their subject with their own pre-conceptions and responding to the demands of their publishers and patrons and the wider cultural mood. What was presented was a sanitised and idealistic version of reality as many artists and writers were unlikely to have been familiar with a village shopkeeper, let alone able to portray what was 'typical'. To appeal to their target audience they therefore presented what Raymond Williams observes as a formula of English novel writing, 'the 'fine old', 'dear old', quaint-talking, honest-living country characters'.²²³ The elderly female shopkeeper therefore served an ideological purpose although the gender of the retailer was largely specific to the mode of representation, artists typically depicting an elderly female whilst literary representations of benevolence tended to focus on male shopkeepers (thus reflecting the paternal nature of Victorian society). The influence of the urban consumer on the depiction of the rural means that it had little to do with the reality of rural living and has to be considered within the context of urban growth and the increased influence of the urban middle class. As Short has suggested, 'the sense of identity, the personality, of England was firmly associated with its rural past...but the rural idyll of pastoral from the eighteenth to the twentieth century...[was] an urban product...The image was that of an outsider, often looking with 'tourist gaze' and seeing the landscape at a distance'.²²⁴ The findings therefore relate to what Bunce calls 'the armchair countryside' as a literate and culture-conscious Victorian middle class were attracted as much to the comfortable imagery of books and paintings as to direct experience of the countryside itself.²²⁵

²²³ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 170.

²²⁴ Short, 'Images and Realities', 2.

²²⁵ Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, 37.

The proverb, 'Distance lends enchantment to the view' certainly holds weight here, not only emphasising the way in which urban artists and writers, as well as their respective audiences, viewed rural life but stressing the influence of nostalgia on cultural representations of the village shop which is notable in the reminiscences of those who experienced a rural Victorian childhood.²²⁶ The sentimental imagery served to tap into the nostalgic childhood memories of the public, evoking a sense of communal bliss and playing a part in satisfying the demand for rustic and 'impeccably English' images.²²⁷ As Bunce has pointed out, 'perceptions of the countryside are first acquired in childhood' and whilst they may come from direct experience, 'many of our most durable and stereotypical images of the countryside come from the literature of our childhood'.²²⁸ The effect was as overtly romantic as it was condescending, certainly as misleading in its attempts to portray reality as the early negative imagery. In manipulating perceptions such material succeeded in establishing a sentimental stereotype of rural retailing within the wider national consciousness which influenced subsequent portrayals. So, just as Freeman claimed that the 'Hodge' stereotype was the result of a cultural distance between rural communities and those who described them, so the same holds true for the sentimental stereotype of the village shop and its keeper.²²⁹ There is certainly nothing to suggest that the shopkeepers or their rural customers considered the village shop to be anything other than ordinary. The charm imbued was a cultural construct therefore, as had been the case earlier in the century, such representations largely failed to reflect reality. The dynamic lay in the imagery as in reality very little changed on the ground.

However, the cultural image does serve to draw attention to elements of the lived experience which tend to be difficult to ascertain from official sources and archival material, such as the role of women in running village shops. Indeed, their prominence in the cultural record of the mid to late Victorian period reflects a rise in female shopkeeping at that time. Similarly, whilst the portrayal of children as rosy-cheeked innocents, typically the middle-class child, was also deliberately contrived and prevalent enough to indicate the formation of a stereotypical image, it also serves to draw attention to their role as customers which is essentially invisible in the historical record.²³⁰ The analysis herein therefore contributes to the history of children's consumption, an area recently highlighted as in need of attention, it being marginal to both

²²⁶ The proverb quote comes from Thomas Campbell's poem 'The Pleasures of Hope' (1799).

²²⁷ Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 339.

²²⁸ Bunce, *The Countryside Ideal*, 63.

²²⁹ Freeman, 'The Agricultural Labourer', 186.

²³⁰ Shop ledgers and business records do not typically identify purchases made by or for children, particularly as many of these would have been in cash, although there are rare exceptions such as William Wood (1720-90), a village innkeeper, farmer and retailer in Didsbury who recorded the purchaser in his accounts therefore making it possible to identify purchases made by children, servants and other family members under the name of the main account holder. See Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 204-5.

histories of childhood and histories of consumption.²³¹ This emphasises the value of cultural representations in shedding light on this type of ‘hidden’ history, supporting the premise that retailing should be appreciated as a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon.²³²

²³¹ Cook, D.T., ‘Children’s Consumption in History’ in Trentmann, *The Oxford Handbook*, 585.

²³² Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of Retailing*, 12.

‘Rapidly becoming extinct’?: The rhetoric of decline and the myth of the rural idyll

In 1869 *The Times* published an anonymous letter to the editor which gave an account of a reader’s recent visit to an ‘old’ and ‘primitive’ village on the Durham coast which included an encounter with a village shop:

Seaton-Carew still clings to that wonderful type of village shop now rapidly becoming extinct, which takes all human wants...and supplies you with anything and everything at a moment’s notice, from a stick of sealing-wax to a second-hand coffin; it, of course, does duty as a post-office.¹

The fact that the shop was deemed worthy of description reflects the fact that rural retailing was in the process of being rendered part of the bucolic settings favoured by many artists and writers keen to depict a rural idyll (see Chapter 5). As was typical by that time, the author of the letter places value on the type of multifarious village shop and post office which formed the roots of the cultural image of rural retailing. Yet in claiming that this type of shop, the only one in the village, was ‘now rapidly becoming extinct’, the author indicates that this aspect of rural life was deemed to be under threat. The village ‘clings’ to its shop which not only suggests that it was in danger of being lost but that they valued it enough to hold onto it. As a first-hand account this is a useful hint at wider public opinion beyond the kind of contrived representations presented by artists and writers of the period, yet the author is clearly influenced by them. It is one of the earliest references to a perceived decline in rural retailing, although an increasing number of authors began to espouse this view. In the previous chapter an article entitled ‘The Village Shop’, published in *The Graphic* in 1889, was used to illustrate how the rural retailer formed part of the rural-urban narrative, portrayed as sheltered from modernity and the influence of urban markets. Yet the conclusion to the article also reveals a sense of unease, the author reflecting on the integrated nature of the village shop within rural life and insinuating that it is in danger of being wiped out and forgotten:

¹ Alpha, ‘Seaton-Carew and Tynemouth: To the Editor of the Times’, *The Times*, 26569 (15th October 1869), 4.

The cynosure of youth, the gossips' tryst, the matron's never failing source of meat and drink, this little store, loaded from floor to ceiling with strange and various stuffs, is a factor of country life, a humble epitome of social economy, which neither deserves oblivion, nor the supercilious derision of proud sojourners amongst the marts of busy cities.²

The use of the word 'oblivion' hints at a sense of finality, that the village shop was at risk of demise. Such examples not only reflect increased interest in rural life amongst the urban middle class, but, more specifically, their discomfort with the pace of change in the English landscape. The countryside was not just something to be cherished and enjoyed; according to Burchardt it was 'an essential antidote to an urban-dominated world', as signs of a decline in traditional rural life meant that it was also seen as threatened and in need of protection.³ Having been rendered part of the rural idyll, perceptions of a decline, of course, included the village shop.

This chapter explores the emergence of this rhetoric of decline in the mid-Victorian period which grew in intensity towards the end of the century and into the Edwardian period, paralleling the upsurge in sentimental imagery shown in the previous chapter. Indeed, a line of causality is established as the idealisation of the countryside fostered anxieties about the progressive urbanisation of the countryside and the erosion of rural life and traditions, which led to perceptions of a decline in rural retailing. The various threats promulgated in the cultural sources are explored in detail in the following sections, including urban encroachment and the impact of urban retailers, branch shops and co-operative retailing. Their validity is tested using evidence from various sources such as census returns and trade directories, statistics for mid century being compared with those for the end in order to highlight any change in the extent of rural retail provision. Links are made to the 'Passing of the Grocer' debate sparked by *The Times* in the early twentieth century and an assessment made of the longevity of the village shop and the extent to which village shopkeepers were enterprising and modernising. The results demonstrate that whilst the village shop faced numerous threats, the reality was more complex and varied than the heavily-filtered cultural imagery suggests, the rural retailer proving to be remarkably resilient. Crucially, by ending the chapter with a consideration of the myth of the rural idyll, some context is provided not only for the rhetoric of decline but also for the findings of Chapter 5.

Change in the rural landscape: the threat of urban encroachment

The countryside, held to represent English identity or Englishness, was deemed to be threatened by the city, which, as Marsh points out, was depicted as 'seething with a kind of venomous

² E.L.A., 'The Village Shop', 166.

³ Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 10.

activity...wealthy but dehumanized'.⁴ Thomas Hardy, well known for his depictions of change in Victorian England, saw London as 'a monster whose body had four million heads and eight million eyes'.⁵ This caricature of the urban populace reflects wider perceptions of an impersonal mass or crowd which was often used as a stark contrast to depictions of convivial close-knit rural communities. This urban 'monster' was perceived to be draining the countryside of its resources, both in terms of people and produce, some noting the irony of a countryside in which little fresh produce could be obtained by local people, the majority being sent to feed an expanding urban population.⁶ It was also alleged to be devouring up rural neighbourhoods, an early indication of this anxiety conveyed in 1829 by the caricaturist, George Cruickshank, in his well-known engraving, 'London Going Out of Town or the March of Bricks and Mortar'. It was a process of urban advancement which caused dismay to many rural residents, some writing passionately about the unwelcome 'invasion', particularly the middle class as, unlike the rural working class who might have welcomed change which facilitated easier access to urban facilities, they were able to come and go more freely between village and town, reaping the benefits of both and therefore had a greater motivation to keep them separate.⁷

Dramatic changes to the rural landscape were the motivation behind a number of literary works including those of Reverend P. H. Ditchfield (1854-1930) who remarked in one of his books that 'it is well to catch a glimpse of rural England before the transformation comes and to preserve a record of the beauties that for a time remain'.⁸ Flora Thompson's *Larkrise to Candleford*

⁴ Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 2-3.

⁵ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 216. The 'rape' of Tess in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* can be seen as a metaphor for the way in which the countryside was being 'raped' by modernity (Alec d'Urberville), critics generally accepting that Tess represented the natural world. For example: Humma, J.B., 'Language and Disguise: The Imagery of Nature and Sex in "Tess"', *South Atlantic Review*, 54, 4 (1989), 66.

⁶ For example, this was briefly alluded to by Hardy in *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* as Tess and Angel load milk from the farm at which they work onto a train, noting how it will be drunk by people in London the next morning, people who 'had never seen a cow'. Hardy, T., *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman Faithfully Represented* (Ware: Wordsworth, 2000, originally published 1891), 164. Other writers specifically made a link to the village shop, lambasting the increase in foreign and tinned goods for sale, the latter suggested to endanger the health of local people through the risk of ptomaine and verdigris poisoning. For example: A Pastoral Observer, 'The Food of the Rustic', 173.

⁷ For example, the prolific, popular and well-known author, Charlotte Riddell (1832-1906), described how the sprawl of London reached her neighbourhood of West Green, turning it from what was a rural village into a suburb by the 1870s, the encroachment of the builders eventually leading her to leave the area in 1873. Riddell, Mrs J.H., *Above Suspicion* (London, 1874), 1-2. Similarly, George Sturt 'wrote sourly in his journal of the 'abominable villas' which were being built in his part of Surrey', the village of Bourne being invaded by new middle-class "residents" which left the villagers "'stranded between two civilisations", the old and the new — represented by the commercial values of a modern consumer society'. Horn, *The Changing Countryside*, 2-3; Burnett, J., 'Introduction' in Sturt, *Change in the Village*, xiv.

⁸ Ditchfield, *The Cottages and the Village Life*, vi.

also provides a retrospective insight into the changes of the late Victorian period, detailing the ways in which the encroachment of modernity threatened traditional village life. She compares the old order of rural England, closely linked to a pre-industrial and pre-Enclosure past, with evidence of ‘the new order of things’.⁹ H.J. Massingham claims that ‘she makes us see the passing of this England, not as a milestone along the road of inevitable progress, but as the attempted murder of something timeless in and quintessential to the spirit of man’.¹⁰ She portrays Candleford Green, for example, as a village on the verge of becoming a suburb of the town, Laura declaring that ‘in a few years it was to become part of Candleford. Already the rows of villas were stretching out towards it’.¹¹

Anxiety over changes to the physical appearance of the village and rural landscape was also expressed in the visual culture of the late Victorian period. The motivation which lay behind Helen Allingham’s picturesque watercolours of village cottages, for example, which she exhibited in the 1880s and 1890s, appears to have been the fate which many faced, such sentiments being contemporaneous with the emergent sentimentalisation of rural life and the village shop. Concerned with the threat to the visual aesthetic of the village landscape, her paintings reflect the unease of John Ruskin and William Morris who had established the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB); she intended them to be ‘records of untouched vernacular architecture salvaged on paper as the buildings themselves were being steadily demolished at the rate of some 2,000 a year, or, almost worse, unnecessarily “done up”’.¹² In the introduction to her 1886 exhibition catalogue, she alludes to this practice, likening it to ‘rub[bing] out a piece of old England, irrecoverable henceforth by all the genius in the world and the money in the bank’.¹³ The appeal of her paintings, which included some retailers, particularly post offices (Figure 6.1), therefore lay in her ability to erase the signs of rapid change in the rural landscape caused by the destruction of ancient cottages and the

⁹ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 426.

¹⁰ Massingham, H.J., ‘Introduction’ in Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 12.

¹¹ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 361-2. It is important to note, as indicated in Chapter 4, that Thompson admitted to blurring fact and fiction in her later books, her claims that Candleford Green was being swallowed up by Candleford certainly not applying to the village of Fringford where she worked at the post office of Mrs Whitton, upon whom the character of Miss Lane was based. For further comments on the way in which Thompson’s work has been established as representative of a ‘lost’ rural England see: O’Brian, J.L.G. ‘Ruralism and Englishness: Meaning in Paintings of English Rural Life and Labour, c.1870-1905’, Doctoral thesis (University of Sussex, 1999), 199.

¹² Treble, ‘The Victorian Picture’, 54. In a biography of Allingham’s work Huish also claims that the transformation was rapid: ‘more than once a cottage limned one summer has disappeared before the drawing was exhibited the following spring’. Huish, *Happy England*, 130.

¹³ ‘A Collection of Drawings by Mrs Allingham, RWS, illustrating Surrey Cottages’ (The Fine Art Society), 4 (prefatory note) in Treble, ‘The Victorian Picture’, 54.



Fig. 6.1 ‘The Old Fish Shop, Haslemere’, 1887 and ‘Witley Post Office’, date unknown. Watercolour. Helen Allingham.

erection of new villas.¹⁴ Indeed, as O’Brian has argued, her paintings, as well as other visual representations of English rural life and labour produced in the late Victorian period, ‘were integral and important elements within a wider cultural movement seeking to define England and Englishness as essentially rural in character and inclination’, they were ‘the antithesis of an emergent urban modernity’.¹⁵

There is a clear indication here of the disparity between the urban and rural perspective as both Allingham and her bourgeois audience saw an aesthetic value in old rustic buildings which their rural inhabitants and landlords could not, their own judgements being more practical and leading to many buildings being condemned as damp or uninhabitable.¹⁶ Helmreich describes this as the ‘janus face of the cottage – idyll or pigsty’.¹⁷ Allingham’s depiction of the rural retailer was therefore very much dependent on the type of building in

¹⁴ Helmreich, A., ‘The Marketing of Helen Allingham: The English Cottage and National Identity’ in Adams, S., and Gruetzner Robins, A., (eds.), *Gendering Landscape Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 50. Photographers also sought to utilise new technology to capture a rural England threatened by modernity, taking an interest in the thatched cottages instead of those with corrugated iron. See: Reay, *Rural England*, 191-2.

¹⁵ O’Brian, ‘Ruralism and Englishness’, 191a-2.

¹⁶ Huish highlights the lack of sentimentality shown towards the old buildings in Witley by landlords who attempted to ‘keep up things’, suggesting that it was symptomatic of a nationwide trend, Huish, *Happy England*, 126-7.

¹⁷ Helmreich, ‘The Marketing of Helen Allingham’, 50.

which it was located, her interest lying in old-fashioned rural buildings, the type which might have been considered picturesque by those who bought her paintings, and in choosing to paint this type she unwittingly, but unavoidably, contributed to the stereotype of the quaint, traditional village shop and drew attention to its vulnerability.

Yet it was not just the physical appearance of the rural and village landscape, particularly areas close to urban centres, which was believed to have been threatened by this urban ‘invasion’; the lives of rural societies were also affected. Critics having rendered the city as ‘foul’, the practice of weekending became desirable and fashionable and the wider countryside became a source of scenic pleasure for middling and even working-class society, facilitated by the growth of the railways. An article published in *Country Life Illustrated* at the end of the century speculatively predicted that other advances, such as the motor-car, would exacerbate the effect of this social invasion, resulting in ‘hordes of holiday tourists invading the quietest and most secluded of our English villages’ which would force future generations to visit an exhibition in order to ‘gaze admiringly upon the presentment of the “Old English Village Street” as we behold it nowadays’.¹⁸ Moreover, continued depopulation of the countryside and the agriculture depression of the 1870s intensified the visible social decline of the countryside which resulted in various manifestations of what Marsh describes in detail as the ‘pastoral impulse’, or back-to-the-land movement, combining ‘the residual Romantic impulse...petering out in a vague love of rusticity, with growing anti-industrialism’.¹⁹

Concern about the effect of such change on the village and its inhabitants led many authors to write reflectively and nostalgically on the ‘death’ of rural England, Burchardt suggesting that ‘Thomas Hardy’s increasingly pessimistic work can be interpreted as a response to this perceived rural decline’ and that George Sturt’s works ‘chart an analogous process of ineluctable loss’.²⁰ This collective body of work incorporated the village shop and its keeper, their perceived demise appearing in popular fiction such as *Jude the Obscure*, Hardy’s last novel, which includes the character of Miss Drusilla Fawley, Jude’s great-aunt, who was a baker and sweet seller in ‘the little village, or rather hamlet of Marygreen’ in Hardy’s Wessex.²¹ Portrayed as elderly, ‘morose’, ‘very eccentric’ and a gossip, which reflects various aspects of the gender stereotyping of the village shopkeeper touched on in previous chapters, she plays an important role in representing the old rural order.²² Despite being rather brusque with Jude, which hints at

¹⁸ Hardy, ‘The Village Street’, 269.

¹⁹ Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 27-28.

²⁰ Burchardt, J., ‘Rethinking the Rural Idyll: The English Rural Community Movement, 1913-26’, *Cultural and Social History*, 8, 1 (2011), 75. The periodical literature is also littered with fiction and non-fiction which reflects this rhetoric of decline. For example see: Rowe, R., ‘Old Martin, Village Shoemaker’, *Good Things for the Young of all Ages*, 3 (19th December 1874), pp.37-38.

²¹ Hardy, T., *Jude the Obscure* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1993, originally published 1895), 7 -8.

²² *Ibid.*, 41, 162.

the negative portrayal of the shopkeeper in the early nineteenth century, she was generally kind-hearted, which aligns with more sympathetic characterisations of the elderly female village shopkeeper in the late Victorian period. Jude helped her to grow her 'little cottage business' by undertaking a delivery round, yet his desire for change, for an education, to better himself, to reach Christminster, the 'city of light', which symbolised his hopes and dreams, led him to depart from her humble shop and simple way of life. Her subsequent death 'almost suddenly' not only signifies the demise of a traditional way of life but also of the old-fashioned shopkeeper.²³

The village shopkeeper was therefore held up as one of the last remnants of an old and disappearing order, a bastion of resistance to the invasion of modernity. This can be demonstrated using a fictional portrait of a village post office published in 1906 in *The Saturday Review*, whose readers were 'middle to upper class':²⁴

The reactionaries of the parish, shaking old-fashioned heads over the changes visible in the village street these last twenty years, sometimes declare that when the new order shall invade the post-office and the postmaster, the last barrier will be down, and the place will be finally and irretrievably spoiled. So long as...Mr Cleophas Mant serves the public in his accustomed way, we are still some distance from taking the stamp of complete urban insignificance...It is an understood thing that the post-office and the master stand or fall together.²⁵

The value of the shop lay not in the postal services, which are described as 'extremely archaic', but in the postmaster himself. By suggesting that his knowledge was invaluable, emphasis is placed on the significance of his role in the local community which went beyond that of a shopkeeper: 'To smoke a pipe with the postmaster after hours is to explore the foundations of our rural polity, to dig among the roots of flourishing family trees'.²⁶ He also carried out numerous official and unofficial duties in the parish indicating that his loss would be felt far beyond the demise of a commercial business. This emphasis on the impact which would be felt in the community from the loss of the shopkeeper reflects evidence of the integrated nature of the retailer within rural society and the important role of the shop as a social centre (see Chapter 4). His easy and relaxed manner, suggested by his use of the 'lid of the meal-bin' to conduct business on when the counter was too cluttered, is the antithesis of the hustle and bustle of urban retailing amid the rush and impersonal nature of city life yet the lack of order and the air of neglect about his shop is also suggestive of inevitable demise. Having already declared that they

²³ Ibid., 180-1.

²⁴ Ellegard, A., 'The Readership of the Periodical Press in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 4, 3 (September 1971), 10.

²⁵ Anon, 'Village Portraits', 264.

²⁶ Ibid., 265.

‘stand or fall together’, Mr Mant is described as ‘superannuated’ and an ‘anachronism’, which reiterates the threat of his extinction. Despite his attributes, the author believes he is no match for progress yet seeks to emphasise that with the passing of him and his shop, a way of life would also be lost:

When the evil day arrives which shall give us rosewood counters and brass-wire trellis, instead of the corn-bin lid, and lady clerks with an official manner, in place of the urbane recognition of Mr Cleophas, then one more region will have passed from under the easy sway of the humanities to the frozen code of the regulations.²⁷

The author concludes, with a touch of sarcasm, that ‘the disturbing human element will be eliminated and we shall take our proper places in the system of the regulated wheels’.²⁸ The reference to ‘regulations’ and ‘regulated’ emphasises the kind of helpless anxiety which many Victorians felt towards the changes they saw being made all around them.

‘A doomed institution’: The threat of the urban retailer

Whilst some literature sought merely to paint a picture of decline, many authors attempted to provide an explanation for the supposedly impending demise of the village shop. The author of an article published in *The Gentleman’s Magazine* in 1905, for example, utilised ‘memories of more than forty years ago’ to observe the ‘extraordinary changes’ which had occurred in one South Shropshire village, declaring that the shop had ‘disappeared about a quarter of a century ago’ and speculating on what had caused its demise:

...improved communication with adjacent towns, increased postal facilities, the bicycle, and hereafter the motorcar, are everywhere sealing the fate of the village Whiteley. His curious little emporium is now rarely met with except at a distance of six or seven miles from the nearest town.²⁹

Typical of the kind of literature which sought to highlight the changes which had occurred in English villages during the Victorian period, the author blames improvements in communication and transportation for threatening the village shop with extinction. However, the author is clearly referring to a particular type of shop, the general retailer, and whilst admitting

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Whitefoord, B., ‘An English Village: The Old and the New’, *The Gentleman’s Magazine*, 298, 2092 (April 1905), 382. The term ‘Whiteley’ refers to William Whiteley’s department store in London, styled “The Universal Provider”, which at its peak employed over six thousand staff. It is likely to have been used as an analogy to indicate that the type of village shop he was referring to was a general retailer.

that ‘village shops still flourish elsewhere’, indicates that this type was increasingly threatened and that the process of decline was well under way, only the more remote rural parishes away from urban centres able to sustain such a shop.³⁰

The encroachment of urban retailers was one of the most prevalent threats to the rural shop promulgated in the literature of the late Victorian period, those who traded in areas close to urban centres believed to be under immense pressure from such competition. The danger posed by urban delivery carts, for example, was conveyed in ‘My Return to Arcady: and how I find things looking’, an article published in *Nineteenth Century*, ‘one of the most important and distinguished monthlies of serious thought’.³¹ The author, Augustus Jessopp, one-time curate of Papworth, Cambridgeshire, engages with the trend for rural sentiment and the rhetoric of decline as part of his reflections on a recent return to the countryside, having been a ‘townsman’ for twenty-five years. Like the writer in *The Graphic*, he uses ‘Ryp van Wynkel’ as a literary trope to create the impression of profound and irreversible change in rural communities and reflects on the fate of the village shop:

Another class who have been losers by the changes that have been in operation is the class of village tradesmen. I am afraid they will find it hard to enlist pity, and yet they deserve some; their disappearance is surely to be regretted, and they are disappearing rapidly...The abolition of the turnpikes has been to the village shopkeepers a far more serious blow than the world generally supposes. The grocer sends round his cart day by day and pays no vexatious sixpence...it is the village huckster who has to pay his heavy quota towards the rate, and, if the townsman who competes with him saves 10*l.* a year in sixpences, *somebody* has had the burden shifted on to his shoulders.³²

Jessopp not only claims that village shops were ‘rapidly disappearing’, but that they will ‘find it hard to enlist pity’, which suggests he was familiar with the historically negative and myopic image of rural retailing. However, by suggesting that ‘they deserve some’ and that ‘their disappearance is sure to be regretted’, he indicates the value which had been placed on the village shop. The recognition and sympathy of a member of the clergy is significant as they were some of the fiercest critics of the village shop earlier in the century (see Chapter 3).³³

A similarly gloomy prediction appeared in one of the cheaper magazines, *Chambers’s Journal*, which had been one of the most popular periodicals in Britain, aimed at the working classes,

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, 456.

³² Jessopp, A., ‘My Return to Arcady: and How I Find Things Looking’, *Nineteenth Century: A Monthly Review*, 10, 54 (August 1881), 259-60; 265-6.

³³ Recognition of the threat by another clergyman is given in Ditchfield, *The Cottages and the Village Life*, 135-6. The threat of the urban ‘shop carts’ is also portrayed in Tallentyre, ‘Country Notes’, 450.

thereby demonstrating that the imagery was projected across the class spectrum.³⁴ The article opens with: 'I very much fear that the village shop is a doomed institution - doomed to death from inanition. The large grocers of the towns now send their delivery carts along every highway and byway of the country side'.³⁵ The tone and content of the article are a stark contrast to one of the same name published in the same magazine thirty-five years previously which had criticised the village shop for being 'an engine of extortion' (see Chapter 3). Demonstrating that literature tracked changes in attitudes, this later article attempts to elicit sympathy for the shop, the author carefully weaving a narrative which places it firmly within the rural idyll by describing a 'walk' to a fictional 'old-fashioned country shop' thereby reflecting the trend for elevating rural life above the urban experience.³⁶ In describing the shop, the author perpetuates the stereotype of an old-fashioned establishment, placing children at the window and introducing the keeper as 'a tall elderly woman of scrupulously "wholesome" appearance' who is 'lonely', this last remark accentuating the remoteness of the village shop.³⁷ Her age, along with the impression that her trade was lessening, hints at the demise of the shop, which might only last her lifetime:

We finish our ginger-beer, wish Mrs Pearce good-afternoon, and take our departure, wondering much...if such an establishment as the one we have just left can possibly 'pay its way'...We know that 'the old order changeth, giving place to new,' but the new is as yet unmellowed by the softening touch of time; and the thought of the cool stone-floor and sunny quiet of Mrs Pearce's shop finally vanishing before the grocer's pair-horse van, is not acceptable.³⁸

The article therefore ends where it began, with the threat posed by the urban grocer's van, although the author also sought to convey an aesthetic appreciation of the 'old' village shop, as Allingham had done in her paintings, expressing a 'sadness and longing' for 'many of the old picturesque details of life, country life especially, which belonged to the old order', of which the village shop was deemed a part.³⁹

³⁴ Brake and Demoor, *Dictionary of Nineteenth-Century Journalism*, 104-6.

³⁵ Anon, 'The Village Shop' (*Chambers*, 1896), 12.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 13. The 'mellow tint' of the 'warm red brick' of the rustic cottages, which creates an idyllic feel, a sense of tranquillity, contrasts with the 'staring red brick' of the urban villas, which invokes a sense of stark, cold and unfeeling modernity. The 'old' rural life is therefore distinguished from the 'new' modern urban sprawl. The allusion to the 'staring red brick' of newer rural cottages 'worthy the suburbs of overgrown cities' is also used in an article published in a later article, the author suggesting that 'We have fallen, alas! into the clutches of the jerry-builder'. Gleig, C., 'A Village in the New Forest', *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, 170, 1033 (November 1901), 662.

³⁷ Anon, 'The Village Shop' (*Chambers*, 1896), 13-14.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

The urban delivery cart inevitably affected many rural businesses, particularly those close to urban centres, yet some village shopkeepers fought back, evidence of which provides a counterbalance to the prevailingly pessimistic narrative. In the Edwardian period, for example, Charles Coombs, a grocer who lived in Ickham, Kent and whose family had run a shop from the same premises since 1750, had to change and adapt to survive the threat posed by a German grocer from Canterbury who came twice a week in a horse-drawn van to deliver candles, paraffin oil and to undercut on groceries.⁴⁰ Coombs' innovative method of delivering paraffin oil on a bicycle, right before his urban rival was due to visit, allowed his business to survive and grow. Remarkably, the volume of business increased between 1897 and 1920 by 600 percent 'in a period when prices and money wages rose by less than one third of that figure' with no rise in population to account for it. The shop's survival, indeed its success, was, as Winstanley argues, 'due partly to the enterprise of its owner'.⁴¹

Statistics compiled from trade directories which compare the number of rural retailers in three counties at mid-century with the situation at the end of the century also indicates that this rhetoric of decline gave a rather misleading impression of the reality (Table 6.1). In Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent, the overall number of village shops had actually increased by the 1890s, raising the average number of shops per village, these figures including the growth in rural post offices (see Chapter 4).⁴² The percentage rise in the number of village shops also exceeded that relating to the rural population therefore improving the shop to people ratios. Whilst the percentage increase in each county is significantly less than the figures compiled by Alexander in relation to urban areas in the first half of the century, the rise is still notable if it is considered that the population trend during the period was a rural to urban shift.⁴³ Some of the large increase in Kent can be attributed to its close proximity to London; indeed, it had been highly commercialised since the early modern period.⁴⁴ Many of the larger villages on the outskirts of the city were expanding rapidly, fifteen villages or rural parishes listing twenty or more shops. Orpington, for example, now part of the London borough of Bromley, had a population of 1203 in 1851 and seven shops but forty years later the population had nearly tripled to 3050 and despite a close proximity to urban competition, the number of shops had increased six-fold to forty-two.⁴⁵ This refutes the suggestion that a close proximity to an urban centre led to a decline in village shops, some even able to sustain specialist shops.

⁴⁰ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 202.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴² Whilst some of the change can be attributed to boundary changes, this was negligible and they are minimum figures as various small-scale retailing went unrecorded in trade directories.

⁴³ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 92.

⁴⁴ Overton et al., *Production and Consumption*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Post Office Directory of Essex* (1855), 443-4; *Kelly's Directory of Kent* (1891). Despite its size Orpington is described in the 1891 directory as a 'parish and village'.

Table 6.1 Comparison of the number of village shops in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	Trade Directory	Size (acres)	% change	Population (county)	% change	Population (rural)	% change	No. of villages	% change	No. of village shops	% change	Ratio (shop: people)	Average no. of shops per village	No. of retail monopolies
Bucks	PO 1854	472,320	+1.6	143,655	+29	105,075	+8	194	+6	798	+12	1:132	4.11	42 (22%)
	Kellys 1899	479,960		185,284		113,832		206		897		1:127	4.35	54 (26%)
Gloucs	PO 1856	805,102	-0.3	458,805	+43	210,359	+20	318	+5	1241	+31	1:170	3.90	83 (26%)
	Kellys 1897	802,875		654,574		252,588		333		1622		1:156	4.88	102 (31%)
Kent	PO 1855	1,041,479	-4.4	615,766	+33	197,627	+35	313	+9	1275	+57	1:155	4.07	79 (25%)
	Kellys 1891	995,392		808,736		267,081		341		1997		1:134	5.86	89 (26%)

Note: For a definition of ‘retail monopoly’ and what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3. Changes to the acreage can be attributed to boundary changes therefore it is acknowledged that this would have had an impact on changes to these figures. As population figures were not provided for a very small number of villages/parishes or stated ‘about’ or ‘nearly’, they are an estimation.

Source: Post Office Directory of Berkshire (1854); Post Office Directory of Essex (1855); Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1856); Kelly’s Directory of Kent (1891); Kelly’s Directory of Gloucestershire (1897); Kelly’s Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899).

Table 6.2 Analysis of change in the number of village shops in three counties

County	Trade Directory	No. of villages	Change in no. of shops (compared to 1850s)								Villages with no shop		No. of villages which had lost all shops (since 1850s)		
			Less		No change		More		n/a		No.	% change (since 1850s)	No.	% of total no. of villages with no shops	% of total no. of villages
			No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%					
Bucks	Kellys 1899	206	62	30.1	55	26.7	70	34.0	19	9.2	41	-12.8	9	21.9	4.4
Gloucs	Kellys 1897	333	88	26.4	89	26.7	126	37.9	30	9.0	50	-10.7	12	24.0	3.6
Kent	Kellys 1891	341	77	22.6	100	29.3	132	38.7	32	9.4	56	+12.0	8	14.3	2.3

Note: For a definition of ‘retail monopoly’ and what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3. ‘n/a’ refers to villages either not listed in the 1850s directories (these typically being parishes formed after the directories were compiled or newly included due to boundary changes) or they are incorporated under another entry in the 1850s directories and therefore the data required for comparison is not available.

Source: Post Office Directory of Berkshire (1854); Post Office Directory of Essex (1855); Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1856); Kelly’s Directory of Kent (1891); Kelly’s Directory of Gloucestershire (1897); Kelly’s Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899).

Furthermore, the figures relating to retail monopolies (Table 6.1) demonstrate that the village shop continued to be misrepresented in the late Victorian period. Whilst there was a slight increase, thereby providing some rationale for their continued use as a stereotype within literary culture, they still represented less than a third of the villages in each county. As it was this type of solitary shop which was typically earmarked as threatened, emphasis often placed on their role as the only retailer left in the village to maximise the effect of the rhetoric, the suggestion was that the village shop was in danger of complete extinction which was clearly not the case. An analysis of the relative significance of change at the village level in each county (Table 6.2) shows that the number of villages with no shops goes down in two of the counties and, of those, less than a quarter were actually in retail decline, having lost all their shops by the 1890s (i.e. excludes those who just continued to have no shops). Collectively, this type represents just a small fraction of the total villages, less than 5 percent in each county, which indicates that those who went so far as to suggest an imminent risk of mass extinction were in fact referring to an extreme version of the reality. Nearly two-thirds of villages and rural parishes either had the same quantity or more shops in the 1890s compared to the 1850s, the widest gap being in Kent where less than a quarter of villages saw a decrease in shops in comparison to nearly 40 percent seeing an increase. The number of villages in the 1890s which had no shop (15-20%) aligns with Horn's findings for Oxfordshire, used to emphasise the patchy nature of rural retail provision.⁴⁶

Notably, there seems to have been some correlation between retail decline and the size of the population and/or location of each village (Table 6.3). For example, of the nine Buckinghamshire villages which had lost all their shops, seven (78%) had seen a decrease in population, eight (89%) had populations of less than 400 by the 1890s and six (67%) were less than five miles from a market town. The statistics are very similar for the other two counties. It stands to reason that villages which were struggling demographically and in easy reach of a town would experience retail decline. A closer look at the retail landscape of the late Victorian period in the three villages of Tingewick, Windrush and Great Chart, one from each county, is also useful in demonstrating that the situation could vary from village to village (Table 6.4). The retail landscape was relatively stable in Great Chart and Tingewick and their surrounding areas despite the fact that the population clearly decreased.⁴⁷ In fact both villages experienced a modest increase in shops, only Windrush demonstrating a significant loss, most likely due to the more notable decrease in population and an increase in competition in nearby villages. The only shop remaining by the end of the century was the Hooper family's post office and grocery shop, by then run by Elizabeth

⁴⁶ Horn claims that 'around one in six of Oxfordshire's 230 or so rural parishes lacked a village store'. Horn, 'Over the Counter', 14.

⁴⁷ See Table 3.7 in Chapter 3 for details of the retail landscape in the three villages in the early Victorian period.

Table 6.3 Analysis of villages which had lost all shops by 1890s

County	Trade Directory	No. of villages which had lost all shops (since 1850s)		Decrease in population (since 1850s)		Population < 400		< 5 miles from market town	
		No.	No.	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Bucks	Kellys 1899	9	7	78	8	89	7	78	
Gloucs	Kellys 1897	12	8	67	10	83	8	67	
Kent	Kellys 1891	8	5	63	6	75	4	50	

Source: Post Office Directory of Berkshire (1854); Post Office Directory of Essex (1855); Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1856); Kelly's Directory of Kent (1891); Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire (1897); Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899).

Table 6.4 Number of shops in three villages in 1850s and 1890s

County	Village	Population		% change	No. of shops		% change	No. of shops in nearby villages		% change
		1851	1891		1850s	1890s		1850s	1890s	
Bucks	Tingewick	877	714	-18.6	12	14	+16.7	12	11	-8.3
Gloucs	Windrush	332	228	-31.3	5	1	-80.0	7	10	+42.9
Kent	Great Chart	754	706	-6.4	3	4	+33.3	3	3	0.0

Note: See Table 3.7 in Chapter 3 for a list of the nearby villages.

Source: Post Office Directory of Berkshire (1854); Post Office Directory of Essex (1855); Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1856); Kelly's Directory of Kent (1891); Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire (1897); Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899); Census of England: Buckinghamshire: Tingewick (1851 and 1891); Gloucestershire: Windrush (1851 and 1891); Kent: Great Chart (1851 and 1891).

and Ann's brother, George.⁴⁸

The Stores 'half-ruined the country shopkeeper': The threat of branch stores and co-operative retailing

It was not just the delivery rounds of urban grocers or close proximity to an urban centre which were perceived to threaten the village shop; those who moved in and set up a shop or a branch store were also suggested to pose a danger through the competition they provided, not even the most remote villages being deemed safe.⁴⁹ This is reflected in the story of Chrystal Joyce, mentioned earlier, in which 'a stranger from London' builds a shop on 'a plot of stony ground on the Deerham road', which Chrystal realised was well positioned to command local custom.⁵⁰ Rather stereotypically for a heroine, Chrystal 'wept bitterly' but accepted the news with dignity, seeing the benefits which it might bring:

"Well, well," she said, "it will be a great convenience to the neighbourhood, and, I suppose, the master will be a youngish man, and he'll perhaps be able to buy to a greater advantage for the poor people than I can – if he'll only give it to them. One wants the world to get on and to go forward; yet it's no use denying that it hurts one when it pushes oneself out of its way!"⁵¹

Like the fatalistic response of 'Old Joe' in *The Graphic*, there is a strong sense of inevitability as Chrystal appears helpless to halt 'the shadow of ruin darkening over them', the long-established rural retailer stepping aside to make way for the new urban shopkeeper. There certainly appears to be an implied passivity in many of the depictions of the decline of the rural retailer, a hint at a 'survival of the fittest' philosophy. This reflects the reality of a capitalist economy, Social and Economic Darwinism having become established ideas by the late nineteenth century. By concluding the story with the closure of the shop and the end of Chrystal's benevolent influence on the community in her role as shopkeeper, the author also appears to be suggesting that the decline in rural retailing makes a significant contribution to the end of a traditional way of life.⁵² In this regard, whilst the story is overtly nostalgic and sentimental, the forced closure of the shop appears to indicate that the author was in touch with the sentiment of the period although it is

⁴⁸ Census of England: Gloucestershire: Windrush (1891 and 1901); *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (1897), 358-9.

⁴⁹ It is important to note that 'branch stores' had been a feature of urban-rural retailing relations from at least the seventeenth century therefore this was not a new threat. For example see: Lowe, *The Diary of Roger Lowe*.

⁵⁰ Anon, 'A Rich Woman', 691.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*, 755.

impossible to determine if they were writing with an intimate knowledge of the countryside or based on their own constructed view of it.

There was a clear dichotomy in the literary image which separated the old from the new, part of the opposition to the newer style of shop being its perceived lack of aesthetic value when compared to a traditional village shop. In defining the village shop in *This Realm, This England*, published in 1913, George Dewar argues that branch shops lacked the charm of a 'real' village shop. Like many before him, he derived his definition of a village shop from the type of retail monopoly thought to exist in rural communities yet he drew the definition even narrower by referring to what he considered to be an old-fashioned or traditional village shop, which he describes as 'a real old shop, the shop of all wares, in a real old English village'.⁵³ He therefore made the same kind of aesthetic judgement as Allingham had done in overlooking retailers who were not housed in picturesque, rustic buildings. This 'proper village shop', Dewar claims, was not 'a mere branch of universal or national stores such as have been started of late years in many, if not in most, large English villages...As there are *Biblia abibia*, so there are shops that are not shops - things in the village shop's clothing'.⁵⁴ The insinuation of subterfuge reveals the author's bias against branch stores; he compares the 'delicious sense of mystery' of '*the* village shop', which is run by keepers 'born and bred in the village', with the 'yellow brick, be-windowed branch of the Universal Provision Emporia' which 'is so *physically* without the sense of mystery'.⁵⁵ So it was not just about aesthetics, Dewar betraying his bias against outsiders who were not from within the village community. In a hint at decline, Dewar claims that these 'proper' shops, whilst a feature of his childhood, might only be found in 'hidden England'.⁵⁶ This echoes similar literature which emphasised the remoteness of such shops, suggesting that they only survived in isolated villages and hamlets. Yet as branch or satellite shops were in existence in rural areas during the early modern period this suggestion that they were a new threat is misleading.⁵⁷

Even fiction which resisted the temptation to vilify the modern village shop or branch store, portraying the old and new as existing happily side-by-side, was still suggestive of decline. Benjamin Clarke's 'Barton Ferris: A Tale of Country Life', for example, published in monthly instalments in the children's monthly magazine, *Kind Words*, contains the character of Job Selvedge, an ambitious and successful shopkeeper who had been trained in London and extended his initial business beyond a single village. He ran a modern store with a glazed frontage in Barton Ferris which was not only the primary retail outlet for the villagers but drew in people from outside the parish. The author depicts his shop as a welcome, rather than unwelcome,

⁵³ Dewar, *This Realm, This England*, 132.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 132-3.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁵⁷ For example see: Mui and Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping*, 203.

intrusion of urban and modern ways into rural life. His ‘extensive and profitable concern’ is compared to Peggy Tompkins’ modest shop, a small sweet, toy and general goods store, ‘licensed to sell tea, coffee, tobacco, snuff, pepper, and vinegar’, which epitomised the sentimental stereotype which was well established by this time (see Figure 6.2).⁵⁸ Here the difference between the trained and untrained shopkeeper is clear, their ability to exist together down to differences in scale; Peggy’s shop is described as ‘the chief juvenile resort’ which catered predominantly for ‘the juvenile stomach’ thus the old-fashioned shop is symbolically relegated to a lesser role, reducing its sphere of influence and hinting at decline.⁵⁹ Her small, traditional shop is therefore presented as a sentimental representation of the past, consigned to juvenile custom and childhood memories, whilst the character of Selvedge, in demonstrating advocacy for moral, social and commercial progress, appears to champion modernity and the progress of middle-class Victorians.⁶⁰

Much of the anxiety about the threat of intrusion from outside retailers was directed at co-operative retailing, particularly by those opposed to it, which contrasts to its avocation earlier in the century as a remedy for extortion (see Chapter 3). Criticism formed part of wider commentary on a perceived threat to small shopkeepers. *Punch* magazine, for example, published a short story entitled ‘The Last Shopkeeper (A Tale of the Dim and Distant Future)’ in 1886 which prophesied the death of small shopkeepers, a process suggested to have started with the competition presented by ‘the Stores’ and ‘bigger rivals’, their fate sealed by the emergence of a ‘colossal’ company ‘which absorbed all the others and reigned alone’.⁶¹ Anxiety about the potential of this new threat was felt by the village shopkeeper, Hardy Woolley, who wrote in his 1862 book of trade hints that ‘in these days another danger of formidable proportions menaces the position of the grocer – the Co-operative store system. I have watched its progress, it has been silently advancing upon us with varied success for some years’.⁶² Members of the clergy also appear to have agreed, Reverend Ditchfield, for example, arguing that the custom of the village shop is ‘somewhat interfered with by such modern

⁵⁸ Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 36.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ This may well reflect the author’s apparent position as an advocate for progress as suggested within the storyline which appears sympathetic to the increase in Methodism during the Victorian period. Selvedge is depicted as a heroic supporter of religious dissent in the village, defying the local elite (the local squire, depicted as a selfish bully, and the vicar, portrayed as out of touch) and was instrumental in the establishment of a chapel, initially in an outbuilding in the yard of his grocer’s store. Clarke, ‘Barton Ferris’, 8-12, 33-5.

⁶¹ Anon, ‘The Last Shopkeeper (A Tale of the Dim and Distant Future)’, *Punch, or the London Charivari*, 91 (24th July 1886), 45. For more information on the perceived threat of the co-operative movement to retail trade see: Barty-King, *Making Provision*, 37-9; Purvis, ‘Co-operative Retailing’, 118-9.

⁶² Woolley, *Woolley’s Trade Hints*, 25.

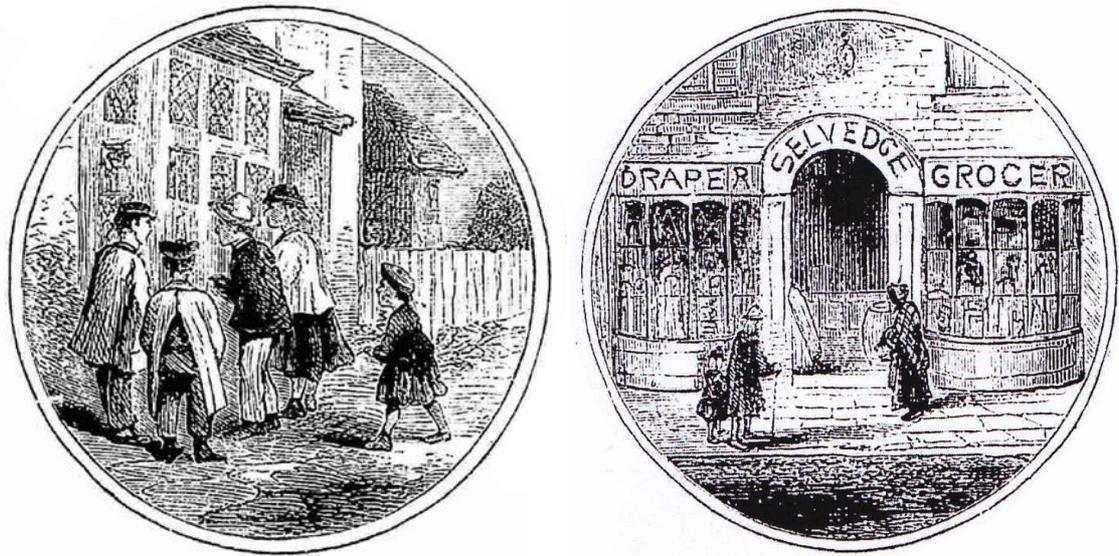


Fig. 6.2 Engraving depicting Peggey Tompkins' Shop (left) and Selvedge's Shop (right). Unknown artist. Source: Clarke, 'Barton Ferris', 37.

innovations as co-operative stores'.⁶³ Once again this demonstrates how attitudes had changed, the clergy having been amongst the strongest advocates for the introduction of co-operative retailing in rural areas earlier in the century.

This threat to the village shop also appeared in wider criticism of the co-operative system, which was gaining momentum, wholesale co-operative societies increasingly perceived as a threat to agriculture due to their large imports of foreign goods. An anonymous article entitled 'Wilful Waste' in Dickens' *All the Year Round*, for example, robustly charged the 'Stores' with contributing to rural decline, accusing the Wholesale Co-operative Societies of being unpatriotic. They are criticised for importing vast quantities of foreign goods, which, it is argued, was leaving the English countryside uncultivated and depopulated and, crucially, had 'half-ruined the country shopkeeper, who can't help charging a little more than "My Lady," or the parson's or doctor's wife gives at the Stores, and without whom country life would be at a standstill'.⁶⁴ The author is clearly suggesting that village life depended upon the village shop for its role in providing credit to the rural working classes which a ready-money co-operative did not.

Again, this general shift in opinion can be attributed to the absorption of the traditional village shop into the concept of a rural idyll, a distinction being drawn between the old-fashioned, traditional village shop, infused with value, and the co-operative stores, which were disfavoured.

⁶³ Ditchfield, *The Cottages and the Village Life*, 136.

⁶⁴ Anon, 'Wilful Waste', *All the Year Round*, 2, 45 (9th November 1889), 446. It is worth noting that the article fails not acknowledge that the wholesale co-operative societies were also producing many of the goods they sold in their own farms and factories.

This is clearly demonstrated in the 1896 article published in *Chambers's Journal*, the picturesque, 'old style', 'remote' village shop of elderly Mrs Pearce distinguished from the country shops which prosper with their 'co-operative prices' but which are deemed 'no longer picturesque'.⁶⁵ The latter provided 'keen competition', acknowledgement given to the fact that they were the kind of rural shop which was 'flourishing and prosperous', modernising in order to keep up with a rapidly changing retail and consumer industry; yet they had no cultural value as they were 'as yet unmellowed'.⁶⁶ There was clearly a right and wrong kind of shop in terms of aesthetics, the shop which had links to the past considered preferable to that which looked to the future, thereby creating a rather nostalgic tone.

Despite the strength of this rhetoric against rural co-operative stores, the actual impact which they made in the rural South appears to have been negligible (Table 6.5). There was an increase in the number of village co-operative shops in the three counties of Buckinghamshire, Gloucestershire and Kent, there being a total of thirty between them by the 1890s in comparison to none at mid-century, which reflects the general expansion in co-operative retailing during the second half of the nineteenth century.⁶⁷ However, they represented just a fraction of the total number of village shops, less than 1 percent in each county. Moreover, nearly all were located in villages in which there was keen competition, twenty-three out of the thirty (77%) having five or more shops and populations over 400 which suggests that, contrary to the literary image, they were not generally set up in rural parishes which could only sustain one shop. Indeed, they needed to be in bigger villages in order to attract the volume of trade needed to render them viable. Also, their arrival did not necessarily lead to a decline in other retailers; in the village of Crick, Northamptonshire, where there was a competitive retail environment, Owen Dicey, a 'Tea Dealer, Family Grocer, and Tobacconist, Draper and Clothier' whose shop in Crick was recalled as a place where "anything could be bought" (Figure 6.3), traded successfully for at least thirty years despite a co-operative 'general store' setting up in the village, a branch of the Industrial & Provident Co-operative Society.⁶⁸ Trade even continued after his death in 1899, his shop taken over by Jonathan Walton, the local carrier.⁶⁹ Similarly, John Pike, a grocer, was already established

⁶⁵ Anon, 'The Village Shop' (*Chambers*, 1896), 12.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 14. The significance of the past is also emphasised in Anon, 'Rather Merry England', 307.

⁶⁷ Purvis, M., 'The Development of Co-operative Retailing in England and Wales, 1851-1901: A Geographical Study' in Benson, J. and Shaw, G. (eds.), *The Retailing Industry: Volume 2: The Coming of the Mass Market 1800-1945* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999), pp.194-213.

⁶⁸ NRO: ZB/1017/26, billhead of Owen Dicey dated 12th December 1874; Crick History Society, 'Elsie Warland – A Crick Childhood – 1919 to 1939'. Trade directories indicate that the co-operative was likely to have been set up sometime between 1876 and 1885. *Royal County Directory* (1876), 994-5; *Kelly's Directory of Northamptonshire* (1885), 322-3.

⁶⁹ NRO: ZB/1017/7, printed letter of recommendation dated August 1899 (following Owen Dicey's death) in which his sister, Miss Dicey, recommends his successor, Jonathan Walton, to

Table 6.5 Number of co-operative village shops in three counties in 1850s and 1890s

County	1850s		1890s					
	Village shops	Co-ops	Village shops	Co-ops	%	Village/Parish	Total shops	Population
Bucks	798	0	897	6	0.7	Aston Clinton	13	1393
						Granborough	4	301
						Iver	16	2476
						Langley Marish	15	2474
						Ravenstone	3	300
						Swanbourne	5	429
Gloucs	1241	0	1622	15	0.9	Bream	11	2023
						Brockworth	2	411
						Cainscross	32	2598
						Chalford	37	5000
						Coln St Aldwyns	1	406
						Corse	4	419
						Dean (East)	31	-
						Down Ampney	2	304
						Lydbrook	21	2637
						Sharpness	13	-
						Stonehouse	27	4352
						Tidenham	8	1736
						Tortworth	2	216
Viney Hill	15	1528						
Whiteshill	10	1695						
Kent	1275	0	1997	9	0.5	Chislehurst	45	5341
						Cliffe	18	2245
						Crocken Hill	9	1073
						Horton Kirby	14	1541
						Lynstead	26	1284
						River	5	633
						Sidcup	51	2739
						St Paul's Cray	5	774
Swanscombe	43	3996						

Note: For a definition of what was included in the survey see Table 3.6 in Chapter 3. Both co-operative ‘stores’ and ‘societies’ have been included in order to ensure that the figures represent a maximum rather than a minimum although any societies or associations which were clearly not shops (e.g. farming, coal, dairy and poultry) have been excluded. ‘Total Shops’ includes the co-operative shop in each village. Some population figures are missing as they are not listed in the sources.

Source: *Post Office Directory of Berkshire* (1854); *Post Office Directory of Essex* (1855); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856); *Kelly's Directory of Kent* (1891); *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (1897); *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (1899).

when the co-operative store arrived and was still trading alongside Walton in the Edwardian period, there still being sufficient trade to sustain a number of shops just as there had been in the preceding decades.⁷⁰ The same might also be said of non-co-operative branch stores; George Rant & Co. of Abingdon, Berkshire, for example, was a successful grocers and provision

customers of the shop; *Kelly's Directory of Bedfordshire, Hunts and Northamptonshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1903), 61-2.

⁷⁰ *Post Office Directory of Northamptonshire, Huntingdonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Berkshire, and Oxfordshire* (Kelly and Co., 1869), 34-5; *Royal County Directory* (1876), 994-5; *Kelly's Directory of Northamptonshire* (1885), 322-3; *Kelly's Directory of Northamptonshire* (Kelly and Co., 1890), 360; *Kelly's Directory of Bedfordshire, Hunts and Northamptonshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1898), 57-8; *Kelly's Directory of Bedfordshire* (1903), 61-2.



Fig. 6.3 Photograph of Owen Dicey's house and shop in Crick, Northamptonshire. c.1900. Source: NRO: ZB/1017/6.

merchants which set up a branch store in the village of Steventon in the 1870s which traded alongside at least one or two other grocers or general shopkeepers for the rest of the century and into the Edwardian period.⁷¹

It is also useful to note that in some cases a co-operative store was set up in a small village which did not have any shops and therefore represented a welcome addition to the local community. In three of the smaller Gloucestershire villages, Down Ampney, Brockworth and Tortworth, for example, all of which had decreasing populations, it was the only type of shop to be established other than a post office and therefore contributed to the increase rather than decrease in the overall numbers of village shops in the county (Table 6.5).⁷² The portrayal of the co-operative as an 'invader' is certainly misleading as Grandborough Co-operative Stores in Buckinghamshire, for example, was run by the Dancer family who had already been retailing in

⁷¹ *Royal County Directory* (1876), 517-8; *Kelly's Directory of Berkshire* (Kelly and Co., 1887), 157; *Kelly's Directory of Berkshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1899), 213-4; *Kelly's Directory of Berkshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1915), 235.

⁷² *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856), 234, 277, 378; *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (1897), 22-3, 49-50, 337-8.

the village since at least the 1850s.⁷³ Moreover, the arrival of a co-operative store does not appear to have prevented other retailers from setting up a shop thereafter, which challenges the depiction of the arrival of a co-operative store as apocalyptic, particularly as they did not necessarily outlive the other retailers. In Langley Marish, Buckinghamshire, for example, a co-operative society from the nearby village of Iver had set up a branch store which is listed in Kelly's 1899 directory but it was gone by 1903, various other new shopkeepers having been established in the meantime.⁷⁴ Similarly, a co-operative store was set up in 1874 in Christchurch, Cambridgeshire, managed by George Cawthorn, but the society was dissolved in 1884 at which point George's son, John, bought the business from the Co-operative Society, eventually passing it onto his son, Walter, who ran it until 1955 (Figure 6.4).⁷⁵ This evidence reflects the general consensus amongst scholars that co-operative retailing had limited impact in the south of England, particularly in rural agricultural areas, in comparison to the difference being made in the industrial north.⁷⁶ The danger posed by co-operative retailing therefore appears to have been exaggerated in Victorian literary culture, particularly as it tends to make no reference to the geographical divide. This is supported by the response of the editor of *The Grocers' Journal* in 1902 to the 'Passing of the Grocer' debate sparked by *The Times*, as he appears to have felt compelled to point out that there was still 'an enormous body of single traders, flourishing and able to hold their own despite the stores'.⁷⁷ This links to Hosgood's claim of a disparity between long-standing concerns about the viability of independent trading (shopkeepers believing themselves to have been under attack) and the reality that bankruptcy rates, in Leicester at least, 'changed little from the 1860s to the early 1900s'.⁷⁸

⁷³ The 1854 Post Office directory lists various members of the Dancer family including John Dancer, an innkeeper and sub-postmaster, Edward Dancer, a shopkeeper and two farmers. Ten years later Edward Dancer is listed as shopkeeper and postmaster and in 1876 as a grocer. By 1883 he has been replaced by Mrs Elizabeth Dancer, shopkeeper. Mrs Leah Dancer is listed as manageress of the co-operative store in Kelly's 1899 directory, replaced by Mrs Elizabeth Dancer by 1903. *Post Office Directory of Berkshire* (1854), 102-3; *Post Office Directory of Buckinghamshire* (Kelly & Co., 1864), 459; *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (Kelly and Co., 1883), 331; *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (1899), 331; *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1903), 91.

⁷⁴ *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (1899), 331; *Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire* (1903), 111-3

⁷⁵ Details on the history of the shop at Christchurch and its links to the Cawthorn family were kindly provided by Walter Cawthorn's grandchildren, Ann McClean and Andy Forth, some of which can be found online: McClean, A., 'John Cawthorn's Shop, Christchurch, Wisbech', www.ancestry.com (date accessed: 08/08/14).

⁷⁶ Purvis, 'The Development of Co-operative Retailing', 199-202.

⁷⁷ *The Grocers' Journal* (5th April 1902) as quoted in Hosgood, 'The "Pigmies of Commerce"', 439, 454.

⁷⁸ Hosgood, C., 'A "Brave and Daring Folk"? Shopkeepers and Trade Associational Life in Victorian and Edwardian England', *Journal of Social History*, 26, 2 (1992), 286.



Fig. 6.4 Postcard of John Cawthorn's shop in Christchurch, Cambridgeshire. c.1905. Source: Image courtesy of Ann McClean.

Modernising to survive

In reality it seems unlikely that the village was a battle ground of extremes with the old shop giving way in scale and significance to the new modern shop. The rationale of authors such as George Dewar was based on romantic sentiment rather than practical reason. Indeed, the cultural image of the solitary shop in a small, quaint village, a literary device which was useful to authors in plot development, took no account of the fact that many villages were prosperous, large and growing. Some shopkeepers also had dual occupations, access to other resources or ties to the land, which may have given them some stability (see Chapter 4). This is suggested by Thomas Edward Kebbell in his 1870 book on the agricultural labourer: 'the man who is doing well with a few acres of ground is the publican, the butcher, or the shopkeeper – the man who in a bad year has other resources to fall back upon'.⁷⁹ Most significantly, however, the cultural narrative of decline almost entirely overlooked the fact that many existing shops, instead of remaining in stasis as relics of a bygone age, were undergoing a gradual process of modernisation in order to keep up with the times. The story of Mr Mant's shop and post office, for example, rather misleadingly claimed that they 'stand or fall together', indicating that the shopkeeper was not

⁷⁹ Kebbell, T.E., *The Agricultural Labourer: A Short Summary of his Position* (London, 1887, originally published 1870), 257.

willing to modernise.⁸⁰ It also suggests, rather unhelpfully, that the loss of the shopkeeper meant the loss of the shop when in fact many shops continued to exist under new ownership. As Lawson has suggested in relation to small-scale urban retailing, it was the shop rather than the shopkeeper which proved to have resilience and longevity.⁸¹ In Itteringham, Norfolk, for example, there seems to have been a shop on the site of the present shop since at least 1637.⁸²

Flora Thompson provides some acknowledgement of this process of modernisation and evolution in *Candleford Green* although she was, of course, writing retrospectively. She describes a mix of old and modernising retailers, drawing a clear distinction between them which appears to be based on their alignment either with tradition or progress. Despite the services which Miss Lane offered at her post office representing a link to progress and modernity, her forge and her old-fashioned values along with the location of her business on the ‘dull side’ of the green aligned her with the older order. The shops on ‘the best side of the green’, far from being portrayed as endangered, are one of the few features of village life which Laura describes as prosperous:

Those who did not care for the dull side of the green would point with pride to the march of progress on the opposite side. To the fine new plate-glass window at the grocer’s; the plaster-of-paris model of a three-tiered wedding cake which had recently appeared among the buns and scones at the baker’s next door...And the corner shop, known as the ‘Stores’, where the latest (Candleford Green) fashions might be studied.⁸³

The ‘raised sidewalk before the temptingly dressed windows of the Stores’, a drapery and millinery run by Pearl and Ruby Pratt who were held up by locals as models of fashion, was ‘the favourite afternoon promenade of the women’ and ‘the whole feminine population of the village, excepting those rich enough to buy elsewhere and those too poor to buy at all first-hand’ were their customers.⁸⁴ Significantly, Thompson indicates that the signs of change were a source of pride for the locals, the road being the ‘favourite promenade and meeting place’.⁸⁵ This may well have been due to the fact that the ‘march of progress’ was a gradual process facilitated by retailers within the community. The value which it is suggested local people might attach to such modernising traders, which relates to the shops’ primary role as a retail outlet, contrasts with the purely aesthetic value which Thompson then places on the butcher’s shop which retained the appearance of an old country shop and was set back from the promenade: ‘Only the butcher lagged behind. His shop stood back in a garden, and the lambs and hares and legs of mutton

⁸⁰ Anon, ‘Village Portraits’, 264.

⁸¹ Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’, 326.

⁸² Vaughan-Lewis, *The Village Shop*, 6.

⁸³ Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 423.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 458-9.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 418-9.

behind its one small window were framed in roses and honeysuckle'.⁸⁶ In being 'stood back', physically as well as metaphorically, from the other shops, it was symbolically placed in the past, the butcher's trade, in its retention of strong links to the agricultural economy, providing an ability to resist modernity and remain part of the rural idyll. Indeed, butchers have always had a somewhat liminal position between rural and urban trade.⁸⁷ Thompson failed to resist romanticising it in a way that Victorian writers had been doing over half a century before, reflecting her style throughout the book, which was to emphasise the value of the past. It has already been indicated in Chapter 4 that Candleford Green was not a pure reflection of the village of Fringford, Thompson admitting that she did not describe 'any house or place exactly as it existed', Kezia Whitton's post office and forge being an exception.⁸⁸ Nevertheless her work is useful not only for providing an inside perspective to the rural experience, exposing the value which could be placed on modernising village shops by those who lived there, but also for drawing attention to the fact that they were modernising in the first place, which was almost entirely overlooked by contemporary writers. Indeed, this is an important point: there was a disparity between the urban and rural perspective, as established earlier in relation to rural housing: whilst urban critics bemoaned the demise or modernisation of the village shop, the villagers actually wanted more choice and better goods.

Mitchell has recently reminded us that tradition and innovation co-existed in English retailing in the first half of the nineteenth century: 'old and new existed side by side, not just in the same town or same street, but even in the same retail establishment'.⁸⁹ Moreover, Sadie Ward has written about change in the industries of the countryside, remarking that:

It was perhaps inevitable that these last survivors should have inspired so much sentiment. Now that they are gone, we can look back more dispassionately and investigate rural industry, not as a static phenomenon practised by isolated individuals, but as part of a society that was undergoing constant change.⁹⁰

The reality was certainly more likely to have been a process of evolution rather than the dichotomy suggested in Victorian literary culture. This can be demonstrated by looking more closely at the turnover of shopkeepers during the Victorian period in the three villages of Tingewick, Windrush and Great Chart, which puts changes in the number of shops in a local context (Tables 6.6, 6.7, 6.8). It is clear that in each village there were various shopkeepers who

⁸⁶ Ibid., 423.

⁸⁷ For more information on the role of rural butchers in supplying rural and urban demand and trading from urban market stalls see: Mitchell, 'The Development of Urban Retailing'; Scola, *Feeding the Victorian City*; Stobart, 'Food Retailers'.

⁸⁸ Lane, M., 'Introduction', in Thompson, *A Country Calendar*, 8.

⁸⁹ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 1.

⁹⁰ Ward, *Seasons of Change*, 98.

Table 6.6 Turnover of shopkeepers in Tingewick, Bucks during the Victorian period

1830	1847	1854	1864	1876	1883	1899
	Mrs A. Allen	J. Allen	J. Allen	Mrs Allen	Mrs M. Allen	
				G. Baldwin		
					J. T. Barnes	J. T. Barnes
		W. Bevin				
			G. Butcher	G. Butcher		
R. Butcher	R. Butcher	R. Butcher	R. Butcher			
W. Cabe						
	T. Cave	T. Cave	T. Cave			
						Miss M. Coates
						R. Coates
R. Course						
W. Corbet						
			W. Cross			
						Dew & Co
	J. Dudley	J. Dudley	J. Dudley	J. Dudley Cave	J. Dudley	J. Dudley & Son
	R. Everett					
W. Everett	W. Everett	G. Everett				
				G. Farley	G. Farley	Mrs T. Farley
W. Fowler	J. Fowler	J. Fowler	J. Fowler	J. Fowler		
		W. Frost				
	B. Gough	B. Gough				
		W. Graves				
	R. Hadland	R. Hadland	R. Hadland			
				T. Hawkes	Mrs M. Hawkes	
					B. Holton	B. Holton
			Mrs M. Holton			
						B. Ibell
						W. J. Jones
		J. Key	J. Key	J. Key	J. Key	
			D. Lovell			
				T. Lucas	M. Lucas	M. Lucas
			J. Maycock			
					E. Neal	
R. Packer	R. Packer	R. Packer				
						Mrs E. Price
W. Poole						
				W. Read		
				B. Ridgway		
					B. Robinson	
				W. Sharman	W. Sharman	
				W. Smart	W. Smart	
				T. Smith	T. Smith	T. Smith
			T. Stockley			T. Stockley Read
			P. Walton	P. Walter	P. Walton	
					W. Webb	
	T. Wimbush	T. Wimbush				
					S. Woodman	S. Woodman
8	11	14	14	15	16	14

Source: Pigot and Co.'s Directory (1830-1), 75-8; Post Office Directory of Buckinghamshire (Kelly and Co., 1847), 1820; Post Office Directory of Berkshire (1854), 146; Post Office Directory of Buckinghamshire (1864), 503; Royal County Directory (1876), 307-8; Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire (1883), 396-7; Kelly's Directory of Buckinghamshire (1899), 173-4.

only remained in business for a short period, as was also the case for urban retailers, due to trade being notoriously fickle. However, there were also plenty who traded for many decades, some businesses being passed onto successive family members rather than ceasing with the death of

the shopkeeper as many literary examples had suggested.⁹¹ In Tingewick, for example, whilst Rebecca Course's business failed in 1840 at the outset of Queen Victoria's reign, John Dudley, a butcher, is listed in a trade directory in every decade of the Victorian period, becoming John Dudley & Son by 1899 (Table 6.6); similarly, the Allen family maintained a grocery shop from the 1840s until at least the 1880s. These retailers are likely to have changed and adapted over the years in an effort to retain their living. Indeed, the village shopkeeper, Hardy Woolley, infers in his book of trade hints that whilst advances in transportation had shrunk the country and opened it up to competition, making success more difficult, modernity still presented opportunities for success:

In the olden times, in fact not long ago, the provincial dealer depended on his isolated position and his capital, he was mostly surrounded by roads axle-deep in mud, he filled his warehouses once a year, he could give credit, and in a way was the village banker, he could command high profits; good roads and railways have changed all this and the respectable old fashioned grocer of other days has disappeared or nearly so in space, supplanted by a more enterprising race, who find in these days the wide world is open to their energies, and they care but little because the squiredom of the locality will go to the "Co.Op" for their spices and to London for their teas; there are more chances for the people than in any former age, therefore, if the grocer will be wide awake he may at least hold his own.⁹²

Woolley suggests that the 'old-fashioned' rural grocer had been 'supplanted' by a new type but he was not necessarily referring to the old replacing the new, as indicated in the wider cultural image, he appears to infer that the 'respectable old fashioned grocer of other days' was capable of becoming part of a 'more enterprising race' should he choose to adapt and keep pace with change and, if so, 'may at least hold his own'. Woolley therefore draws attention to the potential success of the enterprising retailer who made the most of the opportunities presented by modernity.

The Hooper family of Windrush appear to reflect this type of evolution. The fortunes of retailing had declined in the village from a height in the 1860s and 1870s, when as many as six shops were competing for local custom, yet the Hooper family were able to consolidate their position and survive well into the twentieth century (Table 6.7).⁹³ Elizabeth and Ann significantly

⁹¹ It is important to note that some businesses may have passed to an in-law or other family member with a different surname therefore the tables do not necessarily demonstrate longevity in every relevant case.

⁹² Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 21-2.

⁹³ The decline in the number of shops in Windrush was possibly due in part to an increase in competition in the nearby villages of Great Barrington and Sherborne as well as the steady decline in population since the 1850s, reducing by a third by the 1890s which is likely to have had a significant impact on local trade (see Table 6.4). A symptom of the decline is given by the marked reduction in the number of credit customers which utilised the Hooper's shop, Elizabeth having less than half the number that her father had at mid-century (see Table 5.1 in Chapter 5).

increased their lines of stock when they took over from their father, turning into more of a general store, and added a post office by the 1891 census, Ann listed as postmistress.⁹⁴ The disappearance of other retailers in the parish meant that whilst competition had increased in nearby villages, by the time their brother, George, took over in the 1890s he commanded a local monopoly.⁹⁵ This helps to make an important point as, whilst the marked decline in retailing in Windrush appears to reflect the literary image, the monopoly of the Hoopers' shop may have helped it to survive rather than accentuate its vulnerability. Indeed, originally started by Anthony Weatherstone in 1816, the shop was still functioning over 100 years later, having been in the Hooper family for at least ninety years.⁹⁶

Table 6.7 Turnover of shopkeepers in Windrush, Gloucs during the Victorian period

1856	1863	1870	1879	1885	1897
E. Draper	E. Draper	Miss J. Draper			
		J. Field	J. Field	J. Field	
		T. Hale	T. Hale	T. Hale	
W. Herbert	W. Herbert	W. Herbert			
T. Hooper	Mrs E. Hooper	Mrs E. Hooper	Mrs E. Hooper	Mrs E. Hooper	G. Hooper
			Mrs S. Lowe		
	W. Mason	W. Mason			
3	4	6	4	3	1

Source: Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1856), 390; Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1863), 376; Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1870), 675-6; Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire (1879), 786-7; Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire (Kelly and Co., 1885), 624; Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire (1897), 358-9.

Table 6.8 Turnover of shopkeepers in Great Chart, Kent during the Victorian period

1839	1847	1855	1862	1874	1882	1891	1899
							A. Gilbert
					S. Godden	S. Godden	S. Godden
				J. Heyward	J. Heyward	J. Heyward	J. Heyward
S. Odden							
W. Shilling							
C. Small	M. Small	C. Small	C. Small				
				E. Waghorne			
		T. Waghorne	T. Waghorne	T. Waghorne			
				G. Ward	G. Ward		
	L. White						
		J. Willmott	J. Willmott				
3	2	3	3	4	3	2	3

Source: Pigot and Co.'s Directory (1839), 240-2; Bagshaw, S., History, Gazetteer, and Directory of the County of Kent, Volume II (Bagshaw & Co., 1847) 591-2; Post Office Directory of Essex (1855), 303; Post Office Directory of Essex, Herts, Middlesex and Kent (Kelly and Co., 1862), 777-8; Post Office Directory of Kent (Kelly and Co., 1874), 1196; Kelly's Directory of Kent (Kelly and Co., 1882), 116; Kelly's Directory of Kent (1891), 154-5; Kelly's Directory of Kent (Kelly's Directories Ltd, 1899), 149.

⁹⁴ Census of England: Gloucestershire: Windrush (1891).

⁹⁵ Ibid. The 1891 census still lists Elizabeth and Ann at the shop but by 1897 a trade directory lists George Hooper as shopkeeper and sub-postmaster at the 'Post Office'. *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire (1897)*, 358-9.

⁹⁶ GAR: D1522/1/1; D1522/2/1-8.

There are numerous other examples of long-running rural shops whose success must have lain in their ability to evolve with the times. Joseph J. Green, a village shopkeeper in Stansted Mountfitchet in Essex, published a book in 1887 which traced the history of his shop back two hundred years thereby emphasising its longevity, particularly as at the time of writing he was still in business.⁹⁷ He reveals the adaptations which had been made to the business since his father took over in 1840:

Amongst branches of the business which have been discontinued since 1840 may be named wines and spirits, drugs, and gunpowder, and what was once a large trade, that of snuff, has, thanks to good sense, been virtually snuffed out. Of new departments undertaken recently we must mention the Outfitting and Bespoke Tailoring, Millinery, &c.⁹⁸

By adding or removing lines of stock or whole areas of trade, the Green family demonstrate a useful awareness of their target market. Moreover, instead of dwelling on the negative implications of modernity, Green describes the benefits, thereby providing a contrast to the wealth of literary material which detailed perceived threats to rural retailing:

In convenience of sale enormous strides have been made...[A] great saving of time to the Grocer is the packing, by large wholesale houses, of almost every description of articles in packets and tins, varying from one ounce upwards, and the machine manufacture of sugar and other paper bags, which had formerly to be made by the retailer...what a business in pickles and sauces, jams and marmalades, tinned meat and fish, preserved fruits in tins and bottles, &c., &c., this has developed!⁹⁹

He goes on to reflect positively on ‘outside changes which have had an important bearing on the old business’ which included: ‘the Penny Postage in lieu of expensive Post Parcels paid by the consignee; the Railway instead of the Stage Coach...; the introduction of the Telegraph, Money and Postal orders, Parcels Post, and other conveniences in this direction’.¹⁰⁰ He concludes by reflecting on the future, ‘It would be interesting to foresee the changes the next two centuries will bring about if the world lasts; we can only hope they will tend to the real benefit of all classes of

⁹⁷ Green, *Two Hundred Years' History*, 7. Joseph's book suggested that the shop was founded by John Day in 1687 and remained in the Day family until 1840 when Joshua Green took it over with James Marsh from his cousin, Samuel Tayspill Day. He ran the shop until he retired in 1885, passing the business to sons, Joseph Joshua Green and Harford Green.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

the community'.¹⁰¹ There is nothing to suggest that he perceived his business to be in any kind of jeopardy.

Rural shopkeepers often took practical steps to improve their chances. As early as 1828 there is evidence that some were utilising relatively elaborate billheads and/or operating a 'ready money' policy, predominantly an urban practice at that time and typically reserved for larger villages where some element of competition existed (Figures 6.5 and 6.6). Like the Hoopers in Windrush and Charles Small in Great Chart, many also acquired a Post Office licence in an effort to draw in a regular clientele and enhance their worth within the community. As indicated in Chapter 4, postal services presented opportunities for those who could foresee the long term benefits from having such business, not least of which was some financial security from the regularity of trade and the draw of people to the shop. Other shopkeepers were more enterprising, Woolley, for example, combining his occupation as a grocer, druggist and postmaster with authorship, writing two trade guides aimed at other provincial grocers, the second of which ran for at least four editions.¹⁰² Various advertisements printed at the back of the fourth edition of his second book also reveals that he endorsed products, presumably with the aim of gaining business. The use of advertising by rural shopkeepers certainly demonstrates their entrepreneurialism; a grocer and draper in Chipstable in Somerset, for example, used handbills advertising a brand of tea to promote their business (Figure 6.7). Similarly, Henry Mortimer, a grocer and baker in Kempston, Bedfordshire, advertised on a map of the local market town of Bedford published in the Edwardian period to promote 'Mortimer's noted household bread'.¹⁰³

Charles Coombs of Ickham, Kent, was also rather innovative, not only using a relatively new mode of transport, the bicycle, to deliver oil to his customers and therefore beat an urban rival, but also making use of an intermittent offer at an urban dairy of 'buy one get one free' on pounds of margarine in order to compete.¹⁰⁴ Around the same time, the turn of the century, the tenacity and enterprising nature of Yorkshire man, John Taylor, led him to build and establish his own thriving village shop, which he called 'Central Stores', from humble beginnings.¹⁰⁵ It was 'truly a family business' as John's brother William, a market gardener,

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 9-11.

¹⁰² H.U.U., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*; Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*; Census of England: Lincolnshire: Moulton (1851-71).

¹⁰³ BLA: Z434/1, Map of 'Environs of Bedford' published by Roberts & Co., Nottingham c.1909.

¹⁰⁴ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 202-3, 209.

¹⁰⁵ After being sacked from his job as a grocer's assistant John began trading in his own right, starting with half a pound of butter displayed in the front window of his home for his wife, Jane, to sell whilst he went out to apply for customers, having established a line of credit with a local wholesaler, Cooper and Webbs. Wheeler, *Half a Pound*, 2-3.



Fig. 6.5 Billhead of William Corbett of Ombersley, Worcestershire. Source: Worcestershire Record Office: Parish of Ombersley, bill to overseers (1828): 3572/16. Image courtesy of Alison Toplis, University of Wolverhampton.

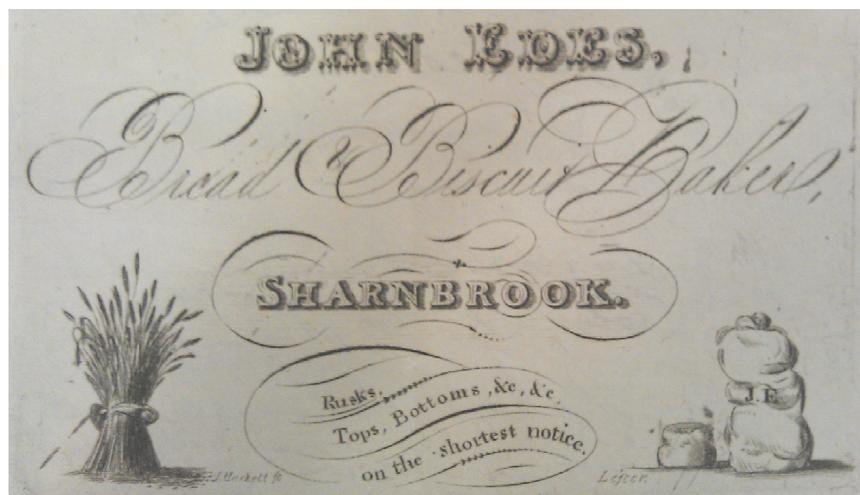


Fig. 6.6 Billhead of John Edes of Sharnbrook, Bedfordshire (1828). Source: BLA: GA13.

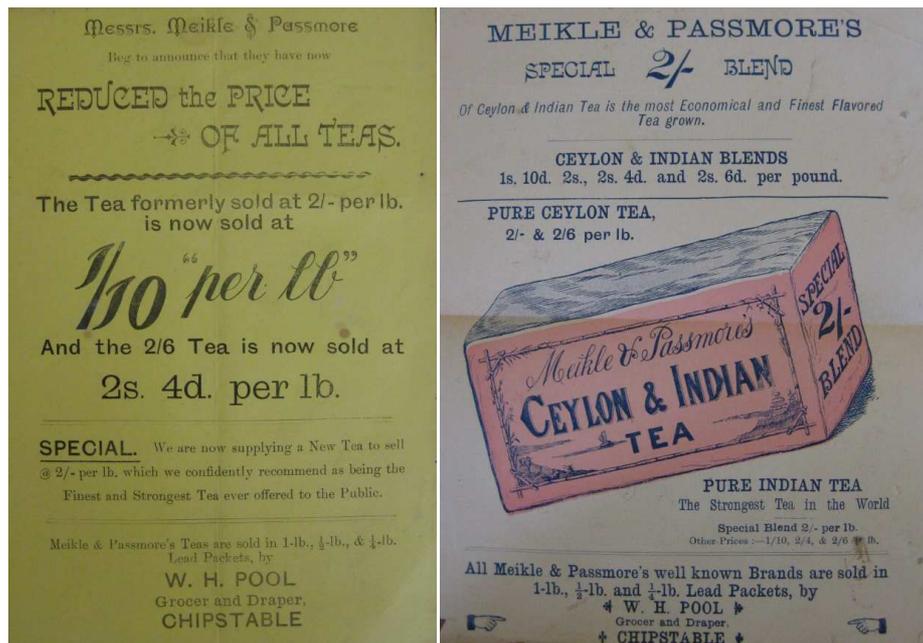


Fig. 6.7 Handbills of Meikle & Passmore overprinted with Chipstable retailer's details. Source: MERL: P POOL AC1/3-5, account books of W.H. Pool of Chipstable, Somerset (1872-1909).

provided fruit for jam which his wife and other local women made in ‘The Jam Factory’, which swiftly gained a reputation in the area.¹⁰⁶ Such industriousness made the shop successful and it was eventually taken over by their son, Joe, and daughter-in-law, Hilda, who ran it until the middle of the twentieth century. This serves to demonstrate that rural shops were not only adapting and evolving in the late Victorian period but also being established (also demonstrated in Tables 6.6, 6.7, 6.8), which runs counter to the suggestion of perpetual decline.

Other shopkeepers were flexible about where they traded in order to ensure survival. One rural Essex grocer, for example, ‘raised his nine children at the shop, at one stage moving to his mother-in-law’s farm but eventually retiring back to the High Street, moving the family as the balance of resources and demands dictated’.¹⁰⁷ Others tried to make the most of the particular circumstances of their location which could provide opportunities to temporarily increase trade. The hop-picking season in Kent, for example, provided locals with extra work (and therefore extra income to spend) and brought hordes of Londoners to the area. Clarence Henry Warren, who grew up in a village shop, recalled the preparations that his father made:

Down in the chilly cellar under the shop, Dutch cheeses, bright-red cannon balls, were piled in tremendous pyramids...Sacks of sugar were stacked in another shed...And all day Alfred seemed to be winding and unwinding the squealing, primitive handcrane that carried crates and boxes and bags from the yard up into the warehouse.¹⁰⁸

Charles Coombs also found it worthwhile to extend his stock, as his son, Leonard, recalled:

I remember distinctly my father ordering special stock. Wooden barrels of broken biscuits, huge barrels which stood five feet high, came from Peak Freans or Huntley & Palmers. They were sold off at a very cheap rate. Then we used to have great casks of golden syrup or black treacle...Everything was very cheap; second-quality stuff. That was all laid in some weeks before the hop pickers arrived. After they’d been paid at the end of hop picking then we did a roaring trade in drapery, but they didn’t buy that until they’d got their final payment.¹⁰⁹

However, Winstanley suggests that shopkeepers viewed this annual migration as a ‘mixed blessing’ as ‘not everything the visitors left the shop with was paid for’ and the disruption was inconvenient for regular customers.¹¹⁰ Indeed, Warren describes them as ‘gay invaders’ and the response of the village as ‘defence’, his father enlisting a local odd-job man to build

¹⁰⁶ Wheeler, *Half a Pound*, 7.

¹⁰⁷ Davidoff and Hall, *Family Fortunes*, 242.

¹⁰⁸ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 19.

¹⁰⁹ Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper’s World*, 212.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 211.

‘a high barricade round the counters...to defend him and his assistants against the coming onslaught’.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, the effort was deemed to be worthwhile for the extra trade that it brought. A little luck also helped some shopkeepers to succeed, Raymond Gostick, a baker, grocer and beer retailer in Eydon, Northamptonshire, benefitting from the commencement of work on the railway in 1895, which meant that ‘shopkeepers in the district had never had it so good, for there was more money about than ever before’.¹¹² He also benefitted from his location, ten miles from Daventry, Towcester and Brackley, as Syd Tyrell explains, ‘housewives had to shop in the village, for there was no quick and easy way to get to Banbury and save a shilling or two on the week’s grocery bill’.¹¹³ Therefore, despite accusations of sharp practice (see Chapter 3), Gostick ran a successful business, buying a farm with the profits from the sale of his business to a brewery at the end of the century.¹¹⁴

Overall, the evidence correlates with Hosgood’s contention that shopkeepers were capable and willing to react to external pressures.¹¹⁵ Yet, whilst there is clear evidence of significant continuity in village retailing, which challenges the rhetoric of decline, it is also important to note that it was generally a mixed picture as the situation differed from village to village and shop to shop, location being of paramount importance. In Tingewick, for example, there was a higher turnover of shopkeepers than in Windrush or Great Chart (see Table 6.6), most likely due to the competition which existed. The situation in Tingewick therefore reflects Hosgood’s claim that ‘when one shopkeeper failed, another was waiting to move in’ and yet this does not appear to have been the case in the other two villages.¹¹⁶ However, the evidence from these three villages does not appear to support Hosgood’s claim that the turnover rates of small traders was ‘quite phenomenal’ or Lawson’s that they were ‘extremely high’, the situation in the country possibly less volatile than in urban areas.¹¹⁷ This reiterates a point made by Benson and Shaw that small shops retained an importance and vitality in the late nineteenth century ‘that should not be overlooked or undervalued’.¹¹⁸ It is also a reminder of Alexander’s caution in his seminal work, *Retailing in England* that ‘it is difficult to generalize about tradesmen’s entrepreneurial

¹¹¹ Warren, *A Boy in Kent*, 18-19.

¹¹² Tyrrell, *Syd Tyrrell’s Eydon*, 102.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Tyrrell, *A Countryman’s Tale*, 70.

¹¹⁵ Hosgood, ‘A “Brave and Daring Folk”?’.

¹¹⁶ Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 451.

¹¹⁷ Hosgood claimed that of all the general shopkeepers and greengrocers in business in Leicester in 1882, only 28 per cent and 14 per cent respectively remained a decade later. Similarly, Lawson found that only 27 per cent of shopkeepers in Plungington, Preston in 1860 survived a decade later, whilst just 22 per cent of those trading in the 1870s survived into the 1880s. Hosgood, ‘The “Pigmies of Commerce”’, 450; Lawson, ‘Shops, Shopkeeping’, 322.

¹¹⁸ Benson and Shaw, *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, 52.

attitudes...[they] differed between and within town and country situations, and the historian, more than the social scientist, must be conscious of the subjectivity of human action'.¹¹⁹

The myth of the rural idyll

There was clearly a gap between the image being projected and the reality as it existed. This was due in part to the myth of the rural idyll as well as the disparity between the rural and urban viewpoints, which had been exacerbated by the critical comparisons being made between rural and urban life. The concept of a rural idyll, an ancient pastoral myth, widely perpetuated in popular culture, had a significant impact on the way in which the supposed reality of a country life was portrayed. The cultural context of rural life was reconstructed to feed a burgeoning urban middle-class readership for whom the country was fashionable. The allure of idyllic representations of the countryside is highlighted by Leslie Stephen in *Hours in a Library* (1899), 'I too love the country...but I confess – to be duly modest – that I love it best in books'.¹²⁰ Yet, as Short has pointed out, 'the term "myth" does not imply falsehood to be contrasted with reality...it can contain both fact and fancy. The important question is not "is it true?" but "whose truth is it?"'¹²¹

Burchardt suggests that an indicator of the increasing idealisation of rural life by writers by mid-century was the setting of many rural novels in the past rather than the present, 'where the fiction of a well-functioning, integrated and on the whole contented society was easier to maintain'.¹²² Nostalgic for what they saw as the simpler life of the past, many 'set out to recast the nature of "Englishness" in a pre-industrial mold'.¹²³ This meant that much of the literature and art that was produced reflected a keen interest in a traditionally rural way of life. Essentially, artists and writers 'offered their public a safe haven from the troubled present by producing forms that nostalgically evoked the close-knit communities of bygone days'.¹²⁴ Late Victorian and early Edwardian cultural representations of the village shop utilised the remotest, quaintest, most old-fashioned type of village shop which became a symbol of the past, a stark contrast to the elegant, modern urban shops and department stores which

¹¹⁹ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 159.

¹²⁰ Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, 175. Also quoted in Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 37.

¹²¹ Short, *Imagined Country*, xvi.

¹²² Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*, 34.

¹²³ Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 336. Various scholars have noted the upsurge of interest in rural life in late nineteenth century and noted its influence on the structuring of English national identity or Englishness, for example: Wiener, M.J., *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Marsh, *Back to the Land*; Howkins, A., 'The Discovery of Rural England', in Colls, R. and Dodd, P. (eds.), *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp.62-88.

¹²⁴ Macleod, *Art and the Victorian Middle Class*, 337.

symbolised wealth, fashion, progress and innovation. Yet it has been argued here that this type of shop was unlikely to have been the norm; it formed part of the myth.

In the late nineteenth century there was a growing body of authors who recognised the gap between what was being presented and the reality of village life, many attempting to expose the myth of a rural idyll.¹²⁵ They wrote of hostile or unfathomable ‘natives’, of inconveniences and discomfort, a lack of fresh produce and the difficulties and hard work involved in growing food.¹²⁶ They formed a body of work which strove to point out the fallibility of the cultural imagery. It is certainly well recognised that the reality of the late nineteenth-century countryside was not suited to a rural idyll and Mandler has argued that there were limits to such rural nostalgia, claiming that English culture ‘as a whole was aggressively urban and materialistic’ prior to the first world war and that this rural-nostalgic vision of Englishness remained the province of ‘impassioned and highly artistic but fairly marginal artistic groups’.¹²⁷

This must therefore call into question the representation of the village retailer as threatened as it stemmed from its inclusion within the concept of a rural idyll. Writing in 1911, Arnold Bennett admitted to being one of those who was misguided:

Of course, I soon discovered that there is no such thing as “the country”...[it] is an entity which exists only in the brains of an urban population...at that time I, too, had the illusion of “the country”, a district where one saw “trees”, “flowers”, and “birds”...Remember that all this happened before the advent of the nature-book and the sublime invention of week-ending, and conceive me plunging into this unknown, inscrutable and recondite “country”, as I might have plunged fully clothed and unable to swim into the sea.¹²⁸

In admitting the influence which books had on his preconceived notions of rural life and to being mistaken about the reality, Bennett highlights how cultural material played a crucial role in shaping urban misconceptions.¹²⁹ Leslie Stephen also admitted that the reality was somewhat different: ‘In real life I have remarked that it is frequently damp and rheumatic and most hated by

¹²⁵ Some writers recounted their own experiences of going ‘back to the land’ highlighting the fallacy of assuming that a life in the country would be idyllic. For example: Lynn Linton, E., ‘Town or Country?’, *The New Review*, 9, 53 (October 1893), pp.373-83; Anon, ‘Shall We Return to the Land?’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, 74, 442 (August 1896), pp.279-85. Less idyllic depictions of rural life also appeared in fiction. For example: Overton, ‘The Schoolmistress’, 477-87.

¹²⁶ For example see: Moulder, P., ‘An Experience of Village Life’, *Westminster Review*, 162, 2 (August 1904), 211; Anon, ‘Village Life’, 352-353.

¹²⁷ Mandler, P., ‘Against ‘Englishness’: English Culture and the Limits to Rural Nostalgia, 1850-1940’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 7, 6 (1997), 170.

¹²⁸ Bennett, ‘Watling Street’, 214.

¹²⁹ In Chapter 4 it was shown that Bennett was pleased to find that the reality of rural retailing matching his preconceived image but this related to the multifarious nature of the shop, its strong odour and the knowledgeable role of the shopkeeper, all shown to have had some basis in reality, rather than the sentimental image of the shop or the rhetoric of decline.

those who know it best'.¹³⁰ Yet despite this acknowledgement of the gap between myth and reality, he still preferred to hold onto the former, as his admission to loving the countryside 'best in books' attests. It is therefore clearly apparent how a rhetoric of decline emerged which did not reflect the reality. The literary image represented the blinkered viewpoint of a limited section of Victorian society which resulted in a rigidity in the narrative and therefore a failure to take account of evolutionary change, let alone acknowledge the benefits of change to the long term future of the village shop.

It is also important to consider, as Short points out, that 'the anti-pastoral shares with the pastoral a distance from the actual events, a disjunction between experience and rendition...the audience for the anti-pastoral may be different from the pastoral but they both are predominantly urban and each is distanced from the countryside'.¹³¹ The popular and prolific author, Hugh Walpole (1884-1941), has demonstrated the fallacy of assuming that change was bad for rural communities in his article entitled 'The English Country: What is happening to it?', which was published in *Fortnightly Review* in 1931. It reflects on change in the English village, detailing his visit to a Cornish fishing village of his childhood: 'Now again I have returned. I had long sworn that I would not, because the stories that had reached my ears of the village's devastation were so horrible that I dared not witness the horror with my own eyes. But I returned'.¹³² He finds that 'stout rubicund Arthur of the post-office', who had replaced 'old Bessie Trew', is rich and successful, thanks to the transformation of the village from 'a Paradise' to 'a Tourist Resort'.¹³³ The old lady, associated with a slowness of trade and old ways, contrasts with Arthur who represents modernity, success and entrepreneurship as he had utilised local tourism to make his business successful. Notably, rather than lamenting the change, as he thought he might, Walpole realised that it was beneficial to those who used the shop. Indeed, incomers supporting declining local services was significant, particularly if they helped to prevent the closure of shops as ultimately this benefited the rural community. Even the problems caused by the seasonal influx of workers to areas such as Kent were considered to have been outweighed by the income which they provided. In considering the perspective of the rural community Walpole differs from the swathe of authors who had preceded him who had focused solely on criticising change and prophesising disaster. Ultimately, he recognised that the urban middle-class perspective drew heavily on a nostalgic interpretation of the past which obscured the reality.¹³⁴ He reminds his readers that those living in the countryside did not view their lives in romantic terms. Change,

¹³⁰ Stephen, *Hours in a Library*, 175. Also quoted in Marsh, *Back to the Land*, 37.

¹³¹ Short, *Imagined Country*, 35-6.

¹³² Walpole, H., 'The English Country: What Is Happening To It?', *Fortnightly Review*, 130 (September 1931), 296.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 297, 301.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 299.

Walpole concluded, was merely an evolutionary process which did not necessarily destroy the appeal of the countryside:

Who will prophesy? We are all so fond of taking some accidental sign of the moment and transforming it, because of our human love of crisis, into some devastating finality. Nothing is final, nothing altogether good nor, thank heaven, altogether bad. England is not destroyed; the loveliness is not consumed - and we are moving into a new world of surpassing wonder.¹³⁵

In recognising that human nature tended to be reactionary, Walpole provides some explanation for the intensity and misleading nature of the rhetoric of decline relating to the village shop.

The observations of Raymond Williams reiterate this point as he has cautioned that discourse on the 'ending' or 'disappearing' of a way of life is problematic. Change is a matter of historical perspective, which he likens to an 'escalator' as successive generations of authors write of a mythical Golden Age or declare the greatest period of change to have happened during their lifetime, harking back to a sentimentalised past, often the nostalgia of their childhoods.¹³⁶ This is a useful means of understanding the rhetoric of decline which persisted into the twentieth century. In 1970 Jack Mosdell published his nostalgic recollections of Hutchins' Shop in Willingdon, Sussex, describing the shop as the 'Caves of Aladdin' and attesting to its unique place in history:

During the seventy odd years of my life I have never seen anything to equal its rural charm and rustic efficiency though I have padded through the portals of many modern supermarkets and the escalatored emporiums that, nowadays, are so much a feature of our New Town building. That shop of Hutchins' had an atmosphere about it that vanished when the pace of modern life made shopping not a leisurely pleasure but a mad marathon.¹³⁷

So, just as George Dewar had compared old and new village shops in the early twentieth century, claiming a 'mystery' for the former which was devoid in the latter, Mosdell claimed an 'atmosphere' for the shop of his late Victorian and early Edwardian youth which 'vanished' with modernity. By concluding with a description of how the shop had disappeared when Hutchins retired, 'a retirement bungalow built on the site as a habitat and haunt for his ghosts of grocery',

¹³⁵ Ibid., 303.

¹³⁶ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 9-14. For example, George Sturt wrote in the early twentieth century about the second half of the nineteenth century; Thomas Hardy and George Eliot wrote in mid to late Victorian period about the 1820s and 1830s and even Cobbett was accused of being subject to some nostalgic influence, harking back to the countryside of his late eighteenth-century childhood for an ideal.

¹³⁷ Mosdell, 'Ghosts', 126.

Mosdell demonstrates the persistence of the rhetoric of decline which was set to build in momentum towards the end of the twentieth century and into the present day, the concept of a rural idyll continuing to have an influence. It remains an ‘oft-cited and powerfully charged phrase’, Short arguing that the rural idyll ‘may be seen to be omnipresent at most, if not all, times in Western urban consciousness’ and ‘has come to particular prominence within the last 25 [sic] years’, therefore it continues to have an influence on the way in which we perceive the village shop.¹³⁸

Conclusion

Various writers expressed concern for the fate of the village shop during the late Victorian and early Edwardian period. Whilst some suggested that rural retailing was in decline, others went as far as to prophesise imminent extinction. This was closely linked to an established rural-urban narrative and the absorption of the village shop into the concept of a rural idyll. It formed part of wider beliefs of a decline in ‘old England’ and therefore in what had traditionally been a predominantly rural way of life, which has been shown to have had important political and economic context. Whilst not all rural preservationism was nostalgic and romantic – Lowe arguing that it had played a role in ‘easing the transition from a traditional, rural society to a secular, urban one’ and had ‘certain progressive elements’ – the rhetoric of decline in relation to rural retailing was misleading in a variety of ways.¹³⁹

Firstly, the village shop and its keeper were narrowly defined, typically portrayed as symbols of the past. Artists like Allingham presented the village shop as part of a collective image of the old country cottage, a building whose place at the heart of the natural village landscape was threatened.¹⁴⁰ The shop had also been absorbed by sympathetic authors into a literary nostalgic vision of rural life therefore it was not just the loss of the shop as a rural service provider which was lamented but also the person or people who ran it, the building, the traditions, a way of living. The use of the elderly shopkeeper not only established a link to the past but also hinted at the finite future of the village shop, some suggesting that the rural shopkeeper was one of the last remnants of an old and disappearing order, a bastion of resistance to the invasion of modernity whose death signalled an ending. Yet the imagery is not quite nostalgia for something already perceived to be lost; instead it represents an attempt to reclaim or capture what many believed was *about* to be lost, sentimentalising the traditional or old-fashioned shop of the present, the type

¹³⁸ Short, ‘Idyllic Ruralities’, 133, 146.

¹³⁹ Lowe, P., ‘The Rural Idyll Defended: From Preservation to Conservation’, in Mingay, *The Rural Idyll*, 116.

¹⁴⁰ Sayer, K., *Country Cottages: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 129.

which resisted modernity, thus glorifying the past. This also comes across in the material analysed in the previous chapter. Many writers either failed to make this explicit, giving the misleading impression that they were referring to all village shops, or specifically made distinctions between the old and the new which presented a rather stark dichotomy. By evoking a sense of nostalgia such authors gave the false impression that it was the only type of village shop which existed. This became a kind of widespread assumption, Winstanley noting that W.H. Simmond's treatment of the village shop in the Edwardian period included an inherent belief that village shops were remnants of the 'old and rural and quiet' and therefore could not be new or fashionable.¹⁴¹ The implied passivity also gives an overall impression of inevitability whilst in reality very few villages had suffered the extinction of their retailers since mid century. Rural shopkeepers undoubtedly faced numerous challenges in the late Victorian period, yet many were resilient and therefore long-standing, being capable of innovation and undergoing a gradual process of modernisation. It is also noteworthy that plenty of shops were established in rural areas at that time, a genre of shop photographs indicating that many were keen to celebrate their success. The rhetoric therefore appears to have been a 'swan song' for the small, old-fashioned village shop, the more inefficient retail model, whose demise must be seen as inevitable, rather than a campaign to raise awareness and stir action.

Secondly, due to the narrow definition of the shop, the reasons given for the supposed decline were also limited, the focus predominantly on the influence of progress and modernity, particularly urban expansion, which was viewed either as a 'drain' or an 'invasion'. Other causal factors go almost entirely unobserved thus giving a rather imbalanced impression. Not only could a shopkeeper just as easily lead themselves to ruin as fall victim to the changing times, the factors which threatened the viability of a rural business were infinitely more varied, including the location and particular economic and demographic conditions in each village, changes in retailing practices, and the individual circumstances of the shopkeeper. Indeed, it is particularly notable that the village carrier, who represented a threat from within the rural community, was barely noted.¹⁴² Carriers offered vital support to the village shopkeeper by bringing in supplies, but they also provided competition by acting as shopping agents and providing transport for country-dwellers to urban centres. Like the village shopkeeper, the carrier was rendered a thoroughly rural figure, one author describing them as 'a personage in the land' and speculating that 'perhaps the

¹⁴¹ Simmonds, W. H., *The Practical Grocer*, IV (1906), 30 as quoted in Winstanley, *The Shopkeeper's World*, 199.

¹⁴² Carriers provided a vital service delivering stock to the village shop but as a service provider they also provided competition. Not only were they shopping agents but they also provided transport to urban centres for those keen to shop for themselves. The significance of the carrier is noted in more recent analyses of the village shop: Brown and Ward, *The Village Shop*, 35-7; Bensley, *The Village Shop*, 20-1.

time of his practical abolition...is at hand'.¹⁴³ Yet the reality was rather different, a study by Everitt indicating that whilst the routes and networks of long-distance carriers declined with the advent of the railway, those of the local country carrier 'became denser and more extensive' and they were generally able to hold their own or increase their activity until the First World War.¹⁴⁴ Like rural retailers, they prospered rather than declined yet their role is conspicuous by its absence from the narrative of decline, which focuses instead on condemning the urban shopkeeper's own delivery cart.

Thirdly, the misleading nature of the rhetoric reflects the fact that it was typically produced by and for urban middle-class society, who, often with little or no knowledge of rural life, found a particular type of shop curiously charming and agonised over its potential demise. It was a subjective assessment, their particular perspective and misguided perceptions of a rural idyll leading them to misinterpret and misrepresent the reality. What constituted a village shop (or, if one prefers, a *real* village shop), to borrow the words of Howard Newby, 'was always a subjective assessment: the preferences and values of the observer, as much as the social reality of a particular locality, were decisive'.¹⁴⁵ Once again the perspective of the rural community was largely overlooked and their voices remain muted by the lack of useful sources. What rural communities felt about change in their local retail landscape remains unclear although it is possible to speculate on each class of resident. The loss of such an unchanging type of shop was unlikely to have been lamented by the rural elite, gentry and middle classes who were able to maintain flexible access to urban shops facilitated by credit, correspondence shopping and sophisticated networks of advisors and proxy shoppers. However, the rural clergy expressed some concern and there is a small body of evidence which suggests that they felt some obligation to patronise local shops in order to ensure their survival.¹⁴⁶ The wider body of rural consumers, made up of tradesmen, craftsmen, professionals, working class and paupers may not have dwelt on the broader significance of threats to their local shop(s) beyond the same kind of concern that they held for themselves, thus reflecting the intimacy of a rural community. Yet some of those who dwelt in villages with limited retail provision, particularly the rural poor, may have worried about the potential loss of credit facilities which the demise of a local shop could represent. It is also unlikely that rural shopkeepers viewed themselves as collectively threatened in the same

¹⁴³ Dick, J.W., 'The Village Carrier', *Country Life Illustrated*, 137 (19th August 1899), 222.

¹⁴⁴ Everitt, A., 'Country Carriers in the Nineteenth Century', *The Journal of Transport History*, 3, 3 (1976), 185-8.

¹⁴⁵ Newby made these observations in relation to the village community rather than the shop. Newby, *Country Life*, 78.

¹⁴⁶ For example see: Graham, S., 'The Bryansdown Bazaar: A Complete Story', *The Quiver*, 220 (January 1906), 570; Thompson, *Larkrise to Candleford*, 462. The consumption habits of the Gibbard family of Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire at mid-century provide evidence of the patronage of local lesser-gentry families who appear to have felt obliged to use local retailers and spread their custom. Bailey, 'Squire, Shopkeeper and Staple Food'.

way as Victorian writers and painters assumed them to be. Whilst some may have been aware of the rhetoric of decline, most would have had a less worldly vision, concerning themselves with their own situation and that of other retailers in their immediate vicinity.

For those who lived in rural communities, the village shop was a familiar and ordinary part of their everyday lives and therefore only geographical or temporal distance could begin to provide them with a sense of nostalgia for the shops they had used. The constructed image of a 'charming' village shop would have been far more appealing to those who consumed it than the reality as experienced by the villagers themselves. It is therefore the process of sentimentalising and idealising the village shop, the elevation of its value and worth, which explains why the urban middle class expressed so much concern. As much of its value rested on its ability to invoke a sense of nostalgia, it is worth noting, as David Lowenthal has suggested, that 'few admirers of the past would actually choose to return to it – nostalgia expresses longings for times that are safely, rather than sadly, beyond recall'.¹⁴⁷ It certainly seems improbable that many rural residents would have chosen to follow our present-day idiom of 'use it or lose it' if other more attractive options were available.

¹⁴⁷ Lowenthal, D., 'Nostalgia Tells it Like it Wasn't' in Shaw and Chase, *The Imagined Past*, 28

Conclusions

This thesis set out to explore the history of rural retailing during the nineteenth century, treating retailing as a cultural as well as an economic phenomenon. It has established the village shop as a retailing entity in its own right with its own unique history rather than merely peripheral to an urban-centric process of change as consideration has been given to the fact that it evolved within a rural location, serving the needs of a rural community. It has also been shown to have formed part of the wider national consciousness, the cultural material proving rich and abundant, which reiterates the value of the cultural perspective in enhancing our understanding of the lived experience as it expands the perspective from which a subject is viewed. This has provided an insight into some aspects of retailing and consumption which are often difficult or impossible to uncover, such as the role of women in running shops and children as consumers. This wider perspective has also enabled the role of the village shop and shopkeeper to be linked to contemporary national debates, such as the plight of the poor and the changing nature of rural and urban life and therefore to broader concepts such as the rural idyll and the national self image, shedding light on our understanding of how our image of rural society has been historically and discursively constructed.

In considering the validity of the cultural image when compared to the lived experience, the result is a mixed picture, there being evidence of change and continuity in both. Certain aspects of the cultural record appear to have correlated with the lived experience as an impression is created of what may have been 'typical', such as the multifarious nature of the shop, the social role of shop and shopkeeper and rural shopping as a sensory experience, all of which have been shown to have had some basis in reality. The village shop was an important social centre, the rising influence of the post office contributing to its role as an information hub and increasing the exposure of rural areas to outside influences. Indeed, as an informal and socially inclusive meeting place, it challenges the idea that other village institutions, such as the alehouse, continued to be the centre of village life in the Victorian period.¹ This reinforces the connection already made between everyday shopping and sociability, but also extends it by suggesting that the rural shop may have served a welfare function in providing a comfortable and communal space for the lonely and marginalised, a place which could provide a sense of belonging. Moreover, far from

¹ For example, Chartres has claimed that the public house 'remained a key institution in village and hamlet, in many ways the rival as a social centre of church or chapel'. Similarly, Toplis has suggested that 'the inn or public house was the focus of village life', rationalised by reason of it being 'the place where villagers met, men in particular, where newspapers were read aloud and local meetings held'. Chartres, 'Country Tradesmen', 308; Toplis, 'The Non-Elite Consumer', 59.

being socially isolated, rural retailers were often influential individuals, playing an integral role in local governance and able to maintain an array of relationships with local people. Their social connections extended beyond the tradesmen and craftsmen with whom they shared equal status to local farmers and genteel society. Notably, grocers appear to have been as capable of being well integrated into the rural community as producer-retailers such as bakers and butchers and craftsmen-retailers such as tailors and shoemakers. Overall, both shop and shopkeeper were important to the vitality of village life, the crucial point being that whilst they symbolised modernity (due to their links to urban markets), they practised ruralism. The findings therefore echo Stobart's observation that it is easy to dismiss the popular image of the village shop at the centre of the community 'as a rosy view of a lost world constructed through the pages of popular fiction or fashionable prints...[but it] nonetheless provided a fair reflection of its importance to village life'.² Crucially, in deeming the shop a useful and necessary part of the village community and economy, the seeds of the modern cultural image were sown.

In contrast to this evidence of a correlation between perceptions and practice, other widespread generalisations have been proven, for the most part, to have had little foundation in reality. As well as developing misleading stereotypes, the cultural record also drew on those relating to gender, class, rural life and rural people. More specifically, there are two main reasons for the problematic nature of the cultural image. Firstly, little or no account was given of regional, county or local differences; an entirely generalised image was conveyed, which was roughly based on perceptions of the village shop of the agricultural areas of the southern half of England. It was conceived out of a rather broad concept of rural life and therefore was not a fair representation of the reality. Secondly, those who created the cultural record were to a large extent removed socially, geographically and/or temporally from the subjects of their work. The shop and keeper functioned in popular culture to reflect or support a wider narrative, therefore interpretative accuracy was often sacrificed for an underlying agenda or message, the voices of rural service users remaining relatively muted. Essentially the imagery served an ideological purpose throughout the century which warrants consideration.

During the first half of the century a process of casting blame and seeking remedy for perpetual rural poverty rendered the village shopkeeper a symbolic figure, accusations of a self-serving capitalistic drive aligning them with urban commerce and away from the traditional agricultural economy of their community. This made it easier for the shopkeeper to be portrayed as detached from a position of social and moral obligation within their rural community, their profit-led motives perceived to have precluded the establishment of a sense of benevolence. Such anxieties, largely an elite viewpoint, were largely misplaced, representations of the relationship between the village shopkeeper and the rural poor emphasising extremes of behaviour to advance

² Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 267.

a social agenda or possibly to deflect blame. Moreover, an analysis of various elite and middle-class evaluations of the rural shopping experience has shown then to be condescending and largely detached from reality, part of a wider viewpoint on the countryside which depicted it as innately inferior to the town. Evidence of the lived experience, however, shows that the shop was a useful and necessary part of the village community and economy, the relationship between the shopkeeper and the rural poor being symbiotic in nature and characterised by a negotiative process. The rural poor played a significant role as credit consumers, particularly when considered collectively, and despite their limited financial means were typically capable in this role and able to exercise some autonomy. The shopkeeper, being somewhat reliant on their custom, was under pressure to grant credit and therefore took on considerable financial risk. Many demonstrated patience and flexibility, often matching credit arrangements to the circumstances of each individual or family, although the extent to which this was obligatory rather than optional is likely to have varied, their ability to maintain a living appearing to have been largely dependent on their willingness to be firm but pragmatic when dealing with such customers.

Similar issues can be detected in the cultural image of the mid to late Victorian period. Alterations in contemporary perceptions of rural retailing were fuelled, at least in part, by changing attitudes towards the countryside and an increasingly rural-nostalgic vision, which was led by the burgeoning middle classes. Yet, again, this created and perpetuated misconceptions as both shop and shopkeeper were subject to a narrow interpretation, the sentimental imagery presenting a stark dichotomy of old and traditional versus new and modern. Not only has it been demonstrated that the village shop was a far more resilient entity than its literary representation would suggest, but also that rural communities did not necessarily view change as disastrous. Even depictions of the bustling village shop are likely to have been atypical. Therefore the evolutionary process of the cultural imagery failed to reflect what was happening on the ground. Change is evident in wider developments in village retailing such as their increasing numbers (which includes the expansion of the rural postal service), the changing nature of stock, innovative business practices and entrepreneurialism. However, the general impression is one of continuity as very little appears to have changed since the early modern period. Indeed, Alexander has suggested that the relatively leisurely pace of change in rural areas reflected little need to change traditional shop practices.³ This may well have rendered rural shops bastions of retailing customs, the process of adaptation and evolution being a gradual process, elements of tradition continuing to exist alongside innovation and entrepreneurship. This aligns with Mitchell's claim that 'the general picture was one of more of the same, particularly with regard to small general shops'.⁴ It is certainly useful to consider his distinction between adaptation and

³ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 236-7.

⁴ Mitchell, *Tradition and Innovation*, 179.

evolutionary change on the one hand and more radical innovation on the other, which is more usefully applied to changes occurring in urban areas. Essentially, the need, readiness or ability of each shopkeeper to adapt is likely to have been a fundamental determinant in the pace of change in rural areas. The overall picture of growth in village shop numbers should certainly be tempered with evidence of considerable variation in turnover at the local level. Nonetheless, rural retailers played a vital role in serving the needs of their communities and therefore must not be overlooked in any consideration of the role of small-scale shopkeeping in wider retail development.

Reiterating this point about the misleading nature of the cultural image is the fact that its evolution was not a linear process, it took a multi-faceted path. The sentimentalising process allowed notions of tradition to emerge which separated perceptions of what was considered customary from those which reflected on the contemporary. Yet there was never a clear separation of the negative from the positive. This thesis has followed the path of the most dominant imagery, establishing three main ways in which the village shopkeeper was portrayed: as a figure to be criticised, relating to perceptions of their exploitative role, trade having already rendered the retailer a figure of contempt and ridicule; as a figure to be cherished and celebrated; and as a figure of pity, perceived to be beyond redemption, part of a rural community perceived to under threat. However, not only was there a degree of overlap but there were, of course, other viewpoints. Some observers deemed the traditional village shop to be old-fashioned, reflecting notions of a backward and ignorant rural society, whilst new or modernising village shops were used to represent progress, choice and shrewd business practice. The reputation of the village shop and its keeper therefore rested upon the perspective from which it was viewed, sensitive to the tastes and prejudices of each evaluating party whose motivation could be as much about reflecting, responding to or shaping the perceptions of wider society as following general cultural trends and producing creative works.

This research, like other such interdisciplinary projects, is not only useful as an exercise of historical evaluation but is also able to contribute to the assessment of contemporary culture and its use of the past. It has certainly provided clarity on the way in which rural retailing is perceived, represented and experienced in the twenty-first century and there are a number of key points worth considering. Firstly, the essence of the modern image was firmly established in the nineteenth century, both in terms of the stereotype of a multifarious general store and the widespread belief that it is an important social and commercial centre, crucial to the vitality and integrity of communal life and part of the identity of a rural community. Its social role continues to be esteemed as greatly as the retail service provided, the shop valued as a site of personal social exchange and the shopkeeper perceived as a figure at the heart of the rural community. The significance of this role can be related to recent ethnographic research on social practices

and the relationship between shopkeepers and customers within small urban grocery stores. The continuing importance of the small shop as a social space is stressed, Everts claiming that ‘the meanings of small shops...[is] constituted through practice’ and highlighting the importance of ‘everyday life conversations’ between shopkeeper and customer, their encounters in the shop ‘about building trust and enacting social and professional skills within shared practices’.⁵

Equally as resonant is the continuing sentimental and nostalgic significance of the village shop and its role as an ‘icon’. This links to the image of the shopkeeper more generally which Samuel claims has been ‘rehabilitated’ as part of a ‘new version’ of our national past:

He is no longer the obsequious figure of nineteenth-century caricature...but rather, like the old-fashioned draper, an emblem of ‘knowledgeable and friendly service’. In the books of sepia photographs, he is a figure of authority, flanked by respectful assistants, and backed by mountains of produce...In oral history’s childhood memories they are fondly remembered as the purveyors of broken biscuits and spotted fruits.⁶

It is certainly reasonable to suggest that the process of transformation in the stereotypical image of the rural retailer, which began during the mid to late Victorian period, continued during the following century with the result that the village shop has become a powerful nostalgic image, part of the symbolism of rural life. So, just as the stereotypical image of ‘Hodge’ was transformed during the nineteenth century amid the vogue for idealising rural folk, becoming a figure of ‘timelessness and permanence’ and ‘the bearer of Englishness’, so the same might be said of the rural retailer during the following century.⁷ It is certainly clear that the village shop continues to have a place in British popular culture. An inextricable link persists between the village shop and rural culture, particularly in perpetuating traditional values relating to the concept of a rural idyll.⁸ Its cultural worth is reflected in the fact that many of the paintings produced in the late Victorian period are still available as prints as well as in the range of publications and other merchandise currently available, although modern representations of an old-fashioned rural shop tend to focus on the retailer of the immediate past (twentieth century).⁹ This reflects the influence of childhood

⁵ Everts, J., ‘Consuming and Living the Corner Shop: Belonging, Remembering, Socialising’, *Social and Cultural Geography*, 11, 8 (2010), 848, 860.

⁶ Samuel, R., *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 2012), 161, 324.

⁷ Freeman, ‘The Agricultural Labourer’, 172.

⁸ Brown and Ward have used a cartoon published in *The Leicester Mail* in 1930 depicting two types of village shop (old-fashioned and modernising) to demonstrate that ‘the village shopkeeper’s efforts to move with the times were attracting satirical comment from those in search of rural charm’, which helps to demonstrate that the disparity between perceptions and reality persisted into the twentieth century. Brown and Ward, *The Village Shop*, 48.

⁹ As indicated in Chapter 1, many of the publications available are based on oral history and reminiscences and tend to focus on the twentieth-century history of rural retailing. Most are

memories; indeed, this is a reminder of Williams' 'escalator' theory, that change is a matter of historical perspective.¹⁰ It is certainly notable that perceptions of rural retailing continue to include an inherent distinction between the old and the new, Lord Vinson declaring in 1990 that 'the future of traditional village shops [is] very much "on the line"' whilst, more recently, Bensley has claimed, perhaps rather hastily, that 'the image of the amiable shopkeeper weighing out quarters of bull's-eyes and humbugs behind his counter' has already been 'consigned to history'.¹¹

The second point worth noting is that the village shop and shopkeeper were not always so highly valued, only gaining such significance in the late Victorian period. Notably, some elements of the negative imagery have persisted into the twenty-first century, such as the close association of the female shopkeeper with the negative manifestations of gossip (see Figure 7.1).¹² Moreover, there continues to be some disparity between nostalgic perceptions of the village shop and the actual experiences of rural consumers who often have a more practical and less sentimental viewpoint. Some claim that village shops are 'relatively costly' and that some of their produce is 'sub-standard', an echo of accusations made in the nineteenth century.¹³ Retailers moving into specialist niche food markets, promoting the sale of locally sourced whole foods and/or opening a cafe to supplement their retail trade, who might target higher income residents or the tourist market, may well be helping to erode such negative perceptions, particularly relating to the quality of goods.¹⁴ Yet, they are typically appealing to a middle class base, many such shops drawing on the wider nostalgic image of rural retailing by attempting to recreate a sense of age and tradition, demonstrated by their use of trade names such as 'Ye Olde Village Shoppe'.¹⁵

Thirdly, the continuing efforts of rural retailers to maintain a living, often with the support of the community and frequently marked by diversification in the nature of their trade and the

aimed at a non-academic audience, appealing to those interested in local, rural or community history and heritage or those simply looking for a nostalgic trip down memory lane. The range of merchandise available includes jigsaw puzzles, model craft kits and a range of children's toys including shops for role play and a Sylvanian families set.

¹⁰ Williams, *The Country and the City*, 9-14.

¹¹ Brown, and Ward, *The Village Shop*, 7; Bensley, *The Village Shop*, back cover.

¹² The female village shopkeeper continues to be portrayed as a busybody in cultural mediums such as broadcast media and the association between the shop and female gossip networks persists. For example, a recent six-part BBC drama programme set in the 1930s entitled *Our Zoo* (aired September 2014), included a female village shopkeeper, Camilla Radler, who was portrayed as unwelcoming, unkind, gossipy, nosy and dishonest.

¹³ Commission for Rural Communities, 'Rural Disadvantage', 106; Scarpello et al., 'A Qualitative Study', 112-3.

¹⁴ An example of this type of shop can be found in Itteringham in Norfolk. For further information see: Vaughan-Lewis, *The Village Shop*.

¹⁵ This is the trading name of a village shop in Houghton, Cambridgeshire: www.houghtonandwyton.co.uk (date accessed: 14/01/15).



Fig 7.1 Cartoon entitled 'Fresh Pears/Ripe Plums/Juicy Gossip'. c.2002. Robert Thompson. Source: www.cartoonstock.com.

services offered, highlights the fundamental difference between the rhetoric of decline of the late Victorian period and its modern equivalent. The former has already been proven entirely misleading, whilst the latter is based on evidence, both visible and statistical, of a marked reduction in the number of village shops since the mid-twentieth century. Crucially, current anxieties seem to emerge from a distinctly rural rather than urban perspective as it is typically the communities affected by the potential loss of their shop that seek to raise awareness and stir action. Indeed, Bensley claims that 'where once the village shop was the heart of the community, it is now the community that is the heart of the village shop'.¹⁶ This is supported by targeted research which has assessed the situation from the perspective of the rural community whilst charitable organisations and government policy seek to help in the maintenance of rural service provision.¹⁷ For example, one such report recognises that shops which are combined with a post

¹⁶ Bensley, *The Village Shop*, back cover.

¹⁷ A number of articles, official reports and parliamentary white papers have been produced, one example identifying the potential impact on particular members of the rural community from the loss of rural shops and services, including poorer diet, reduced social interaction and loneliness and difficulties in accessing financial services. Commission for Rural Communities, 'Rural Disadvantage', 101, 106. A useful list of relevant publications up to 2007 can be found in the references to Paddison, A., and Calderwood, E., 'Rural Retailing: A Sector in Decline?', *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, 35, 2 (2007), pp.136-155. More recent examples include: Commission for Rural Communities, 'The Economic Significance of Post

office 'provide an important social focus for the community' and suggests that the future of rural retailing lies in new initiatives, such as community run shops.¹⁸ The grassroots basis of the modern rhetoric of decline, epitomised by the 'use it or lose it' slogan, which hints at distinct aims and objectives which were absent in the late Victorian period, is undoubtedly feeding the way in which the village shop is represented in cultural mediums such as print and broadcast media. They have helped to draw attention to successful campaigns to save village shops and striking examples of innovation.¹⁹ For example, a collaboration between the Plunkett Foundation, which helps rural communities with community-ownership schemes, and the scriptwriters on BBC Radio 4's long-running and popular drama, *The Archers*, resulted in a storyline aired from October 2009 to June 2010 which focused on the campaign to save the shop in the fictional village of Ambridge, it eventually turning into a community shop.²⁰ Credited with helping to raise awareness and a subsequent increase in interest in community ownership, it is an example of how cultural representations are directly affecting the evolution of rural retailing in a way not seen during the nineteenth century.²¹

So, notwithstanding the continuing appeal of nostalgic imagery, cultural representations of rural retailing have been drawn somewhat closer to the reality. Whilst it has been shown that the rhetoric of decline so widely espoused today began more than a century ago, they seem to be fundamentally different entities in terms of their perspective. An increasing awareness and celebration of innovative forms of rural retailing sets modern perceptions apart from those of the

Offices'; Scarpello et al., 'A Qualitative Study'; Barrett, H. et al., 'Addressing Rural Isolation in the Central and Eastern Region: The Role of Community Shops', Plunkett Foundation (October 2012).

¹⁸ Commission for Rural Communities, 'The Economic Significance of Post Offices', 24, 27.

¹⁹ For example see: Lister, M., 'Family's 1786 shop saved for village', *Express* (2nd April 2013), www.express.co.uk; Bloom, D. and Osbourne, L., 'Is this the future of the village shop?', *The Daily Mail* (20th March 2014), www.dailymail.co.uk; Spillett, R., 'Village store run by cooperative set up in disused school building', *The Daily Mail* (1st May 2014), www.dailymail.co.uk (all websites accessed 29/01/15).

²⁰ The plight of the village shop has also been depicted in the popular drama *Midsomer Murders*, an episode entitled 'Country Matters' depicting a rural community divided over the plans of a supermarket called 'Goodfare' to open a store in the area, threatening the local shop run by Mr and Mrs Talbot (Season 9, Episode 6, aired on 10th September 2006).

²¹ For example, various articles have reflected on the influence of the storyline on the community shop movement: 'BBC highlights village shop plight' (27th November 2009), www.rsonline.org.uk; Irvine, C., 'Archers village shop plot inspires rural communities', *The Telegraph* (31st December 2009), www.telegraph.co.uk; Harrison, D., 'Residents save village shop in Archers-style buy-out', *The Telegraph* (14th March 2010), www.telegraph.co.uk; 'PRESS RELEASE: The Archers Community-Owned Shop opening is the beginning of a rural services revolution', Plunkett Foundation (2010), www.plunkett.co.uk; 'Ambridge Community Shop Set to Open', Plunkett Community Shops Online (6th May 2010), www.communityshops.coop; 'Minister for Decentralisation Greg Clark congratulates the people of Ambridge for saving their local shop', Government Services and Information (3rd June 2010), www.gov.uk (all websites accessed 29/03/14).

late Victorian period, providing a realistic counter to the perpetual image of the marginalised village shop. Indeed, targeted research on the lived experience has led to widely-held beliefs being challenged, Paddison and Calderwood questioning perceptions of perpetual decline: 'Rural retailing perceptions revolve around images of decline; essentially, there is a caricature of the marginal village shop. In practice, rural retailing is multi-faceted with prospering sub-sectors such as farm shops'.²² Essentially they claim that evidence of innovation needs to be juxtaposed against more marginal sub-sectors and that 'stereotyping the sector is erroneous'.²³ Whilst this is a useful and valid point, it seems highly likely that nostalgia will continue to influence the way in which we view our rural shops therefore, in the not too distant future, the village shops of today will become the traditional shops of our past.

²² Paddison and Calderwood, 'Rural Retailing', 141.

²³ *Ibid.*, 136.

Appendix

Details of three village shops

County	Village	Name of retailer	Trade	Period analysed	Nearest market town (miles)	Population		Houses		Topography (contemporary information)
						1841	1901	1841	1901	
Bucks	Tingewick	Rebecca Course	Baker	1838-40	Buckingham (2.75)	911	635	205	189	A village and parish in NW of the county on Oxfordshire border. The parish is bounded by the River Great Ouse to the north and to the east by one of its tributaries. The warden and fellows of New College, Oxford are lords of the manor. Contains a church, Wesleyan chapel and an endowed school. The village lies along the road from Buckingham to Deddington (Oxon). The parish was enclosed in 1773.
Gloucs	Windrush	The Hooper family	Baker (later Grocer, Draper & Post Office)	1848-54; 1885-86	Burford, Oxon (4)	313	222	61	58	A village and parish in East of the county, close to Oxfordshire border. Seated on the River Windrush, it is a compact settlement in which most of the houses stand around the green where the four roads into the village converge. Lord Sherborne is lord of the manor and chief landowner. Contains a church and day school for poor children (supported by Lord Sherborne). The parish is crossed by the Cheltenham to Oxford road and was enclosed in 1777.
Kent	Great Chart	Charles Small	Grocer & Butcher (later Post Office)	1834-42	Ashford (2)	714	694	130	161	A village and parish in SE of Kent, near the River Stour and River Medway. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners are lords of the manor. Contains a church, Wesleyan chapel, a national school and two alms-houses. The road from Tenterden through Betersden to Ashford goes through the village.

Note: The variation in acreage shows the lowest and highest quoted figures in various trade directories published throughout the Victorian period. The Hooper family shop was run by George Hooper, a baker, but by 1856 his son, Thomas, had taken over, and then by 1863 George's daughter, Elizabeth, was running the shop as a grocer and draper. By 1891 it was also a post office, Elizabeth's sister, Ann, listed as Post Mistress and by 1901 their younger brother, George, a carpenter, had taken over. Charles Small is recorded as either a grocer or shopkeeper up to the 1830s, as a grocer and butcher in 1839 and 1842, as a salesman in 1851 (after discharging his bankruptcy) and thereafter as postmaster.

Source: Pigot and Co.'s Directory (1830-1); Pigot and Co.'s Directory (1839); Bagshaw, *History, Gazetteer, and Directory* (1847); *Post Office Directory of Essex* (1855); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1856); *Post Office Directory of Essex* (1862); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1863); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1870); *Post Office Directory of Gloucestershire* (1879); *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (1885); *Kelly's Directory of Gloucestershire* (1897); *Census of England: Buckinghamshire: Tingewick* (1841 and 1901); *Gloucestershire: Windrush* (1841-1901); *Kent: Great Chart* (1841-61 and 1901); KHL: Q/CI/296/14 and P81/1; Wilson, J.M., *The Imperial Gazetteer of England and Wales* (Edinburgh, 1870-2), www.visionofbritain.org.uk (date accessed: 12/12/14); 'Parishes: Windrush', in Elrington, C.R. (ed.), *A History of the County of Gloucester: Volume 6* (London: Victoria County History, 1965), pp. 178-184, www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/glos (date accessed: 12/12/14); 'Parishes: Tingewick', in Page, W. (ed.), *A History of the County of Buckingham: Volume 4* (London: Victoria County History, 1927), pp. 249-251, www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/bucks (date accessed: 12/12/14); 'Parishes: Great Chart', in Hasted, E., *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 7* (Canterbury, 1798), pp. 497-514, www.british-history.ac.uk/kent (date accessed: 12/12/14).

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