

Retail revolution and the village shop, c.1660-1860

The 200 years following the Restoration were a period of profound change in British retailing. Notwithstanding recent correctives to a teleological view of the rise of the shop, it is clear that fairs lost much of their earlier significance, whilst markets were transformed both spatially and functionally with the spread of market halls.¹ Both lost ground to fixed shops which increasingly embodied modern retailing across Europe. Indeed, following Jefferys, the growing dominance of shops and their concentration into specialist areas of town centres have been seen as two of the defining features of a largely nineteenth-century retail revolution.² Perhaps most important, though, were the new retail practices which facilitated increasingly efficient sales of large quantities of goods to large numbers of customers: fixed prices, cash sales and advertising. Multiples and especially department stores were in the vanguard of these developments; they had increasingly elaborate displays (in windows and in stores) which encouraged browsing and new forms of leisurely shopping, and they offered the working classes access to a wider range of goods, thus democratising luxury.³

More recently, this traditional view of retail change has been challenged in a British and European context, both in its unifying vision of the modernity of Victorian shops and cities, and in the ways that it ignores earlier developments in retail practices and spaces. On the one hand, there is growing recognition of the 'traditional' nature of department stores selling (with its emphasis on service) and the continued importance of earlier retail formats, including markets and itinerants.⁴ On the other, analyses of retailing in earlier periods has pushed back many of these 'revolutionary' changes into the eighteenth century and even earlier. Particularly in Britain and the Low Countries, early-modern shops are now widely recognised as sophisticated spaces of social interaction and economic exchange.⁵

¹ Mitchell 'Role of fairs'; Schmiechen and Carls, *British market hall*; Mitchell, *Innovation and tradition*, 152-70.

² Jeffereys, *Retail trading*.

³ See Shaw, 'Role of retailing'; Alexander, 'Evolution of multiple retailing'; Corrigan, *Sociology of Consumption*, 51-5; Crossick and Jaumain, 'World of the department store'; Morrison, *English shops*; Stobart, *Spend, spend, spend*, 143-51, 167-74.

⁴ Walsh, 'Newness of the department store'; Mitchell, *Innovation and tradition*, 61-82, 153-70; Guardia and Oyon (*Making cities through market halls*); Van Den Heuvel, 'Selling in the shadows'.

⁵ See, for example: Fowler, 'Provincial retail practice'; Walsh, 'Shop design'; Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 76-115; Stobart and Hann, 'Retailing revolution'; Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of consumption*, 123-32;

Retail transformation is thus seen as contingent and fragmented, rather than a unifying process of modernisation. Yet it remains an essentially urban phenomenon, the focus of debate being firmly on towns and cities. Village shops remain the Cinderella: studied little and assumed to be dowdy and workaday spaces which altered little over the centuries.⁶ In the mainstream historiography on retailing, village shops have occupied a place seemingly beyond the reach of the powerful forces that were transforming shops and streets across provincial England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For rural and agricultural historians, the village shop has only occasionally come into sharp focus, despite widespread interest in rural demand, the changing living standards of agricultural labourers and, more recently, the material lives of the rural poor.⁷ This relative neglect is all the more surprising, because, for contemporaries, village shops were important places, successively lambasted for cynically exploiting the rural poor and lauded as icons of a vanishing way of life as urban practices marched across the countryside in the late nineteenth century.⁸

The established orthodoxy for England suggests that, although the origin of the village shop lay in earlier periods, numbers only grew significantly in the Victorian era.⁹ Crompton argues that this was a result of greater demand prompted by growing agricultural output and prosperity in the early nineteenth century, but it also reflected the increasing orientation of rural workers towards the market provision of goods and services – a core element of de Vries' industrious revolution.¹⁰ On the supply side, Winstanley has argued that the expansion of the railways and the national postal service also encouraged retail growth in the countryside.¹¹ Such arguments

Van Aert and Van Damme, 'Retail dynamics'; Blondé and Van Damme, 'Retail growth'; Furnee and Lesger, *Landscapes of consumption*.

⁶ A rare exception is Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 148-59; but their focus is more on the household economy than the shop. Stobart 'Village shop' offers an overview for the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century; for the nineteenth century see Bailey, 'Consumption and status', 'Squire, shopkeeper and staple food' and 'The village shop'.

⁷ Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour*; De Vries, *Industrious Revolution*; Howkins, 'The English Farm Labourer'; King, 'Pauper inventories'; Green, 'Heartless and unhomey'. For a synopsis of the standard of living debate see Burchardt, *Paradise Lost*.

⁸ Criticism was fiercest during periods of rising rural poverty, most notably the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, see *Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition*, 16-18; Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 500; Anon, 'House Of Lords'. For discussion of the changing attitudes to rural shops, see: Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of retailing*, 36-45; Bailey, 'The village shop', chapters 3 and 5.

⁹ Chartres, 'Country tradesmen', 300.

¹⁰ Crompton, 'Rural service occupations'; de Vries, *Industrious Revolution*, 122-68.

¹¹ Winstanley, *Shopkeeper's world*, 202.

echo the findings of European studies, notably that of Van Den Heuvel and Ogilvie, who demonstrate the widespread distribution, but also the unevenness of retail provision across the Netherlands in the long eighteenth century.¹² They attribute spatial variations to a range of factors, including settlement size and density, local agricultural systems and the level of women's involvement in retailing. Similar factors were at play in England: Stobart argues that the distribution of craftsmen and retailers in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Cheshire was linked to agricultural prosperity, the presence of rural industry and parish size; Martin notes different provision in the pastoral and arable districts in Warwickshire, and Holderness shows how enclosure and the resultant decrease in self-sufficiency was associated with a growing reliance on the market, including rural shops.¹³

There is, therefore, a fairly clear picture of both the changing number and distribution of rural shops in England and the causes which lay behind them. Yet, despite Chartres echoing the argument in Van Den Heuvel and Ogilvie's analysis of the Netherlands and asserting that the growing number of shops was 'the aspect of the 'revolution' most striking in the rural districts',¹⁴ numbers are by no means the only things that define retail revolution. This is apparent from studies of retail change in towns, which – as we have already seen – emphasise changes in practices and efficiency rather than sheer numbers. Building on this, we argue that a similar perspective is required on village shops. Accordingly, this paper seeks to offer a better understanding of their character and their selling practices over the *longue durée*. Was the growth in numbers recorded in regional studies accompanied by a shift in the character and practices of village shopkeepers, or were they marked by the kind of 'long and profound continuities' in retailing noted by Cox and Dannehl?¹⁵

Whilst lengthy definitional discussion would be tedious and unproductive, it is useful to lay out some basic parameters. We are concerned here with shops in all rural settlements, from the smallest hamlets to substantial villages. The latter sometimes had populations similar to those of small towns, but are distinguished by their lack of a market, which in contemporary gazetteers and directories was often the crucial defining feature of urban status.¹⁶ Many village

¹² Van Den Heuvel and Ogilvie, 'Retail development'.

¹³ Stobart, 'Rural craftsmen-retailers'; Stobart, 'Food retailers'; Martin, 'Village traders'; Holderness, 'Rural tradesmen'.

¹⁴ Chartres, 'Country tradesmen', 303.

¹⁵ Cox and Dannehl, *Perceptions of retailing*, 185.

¹⁶ See, for example, Adams, *Index Villaris*; Cox, *Magna Britannia*; Kelly's *Post Office Directories*. Some places, such as Tarporley in Cheshire, occupied a liminal position, but never achieved general recognition as towns and are included as villages in the analysis.

shops are apparent from occupational titles, including dual occupations which were frequently recorded in trade directories, though less apparent in other sources such as probate inventories. Part-time retailers were identified by analysing a wide set of probate inventories, including those of women, for evidence of shop goods and equipment, for example, small quantities of groceries (which would generally be excluded from domestic inventories), scales and weights or even counters.¹⁷ This broader trawl included a sample of six Cheshire parishes from which every extant inventory was examined for evidence of shopkeeping, a process which revealed a small number of additional retailers, but undoubtedly missed those who were most marginal – the same group that are undoubtedly omitted from the trade directories used for the later period of our study. This means that the sample of rural shopkeepers examined here probably over-represents the more substantial, though sometimes still very modest, village shop. Nonetheless, we have a large and wide ranging data-set through which to explore the changing character of rural shopkeeping.

Working with this sample, our aim is to assess the extent to which rural shops were part of a wider ‘retail revolution’ in the period c.1660-1860. In contrast to the approach of previous studies, we take a more qualitative perspective. Taking our lead from the key features of ‘modern’ shops identified in the literature,¹⁸ we begin by examining the changing nature of the village shop in terms of its stock, degree of specialisation and scale of operation. To what extent do we see the kinds of changes that ‘revolutionised’ urban shops; what was the timing of any transformation, and how did these reflect and impact on the degree of competition felt by rural tradesmen? Building on this, we examine the trading practices of rural shopkeepers in terms of credit provision, prices and profit margins, and marketing. How far did these ‘modern’ practices penetrate rural retailing: were they part of broader changes or did they remain wedded to traditional modes of operation? In addressing these questions, we challenge established readings of the village shop as marginal to change, arguing that it was an important agent of broader processes of retail and consumer transformation.

I

In viewing village shops as general stores, stocking a little of everything but essentially serving the basic needs of their local population, luxuries are generally seen as lying beyond their

¹⁷ Cox and Cox, ‘Probate, 1500-1800’.

¹⁸ Jefferys, *Retail trading*; Corrigan, *Sociology of consumption*, 51-5; Stobart and Hann, ‘Retail revolution’; Blondé and Van Damme, ‘Retail growth’, Furnee and Lesger, *Landscape of consumption*.

remit.¹⁹ Partly arising from this, an established critique, dating back to the 15th century and probably earlier, portrays the stock as old and old fashioned. In *Piers Plowman*, for example, an account of the deceits perpetrated by drapers includes the lines: 'But for the grace of guile in grading of my goods / They had been unsold these seven years, so help me God.'²⁰ Testing these stereotypes is no easy matter. There were undoubtedly old items amongst the stock of many shopkeepers, including the parcel of 'unfashionable' buttons noted by the appraisers of William Bastard of Madron in Cornwall (d.1720) or the 'old fashioned' laces found in the shop of William Partridge of Elham in Kent (d.1681),²¹ but these were isolated instances amongst the dozens of lines stocked by these two retailers. Indeed, what is far more evident from such inventories is the variety of goods available in many village shops (Table 1). The mainstays were groceries (most notably sugar) and haberdashery (especially thread and ribbons), but the majority also stocked textiles and a variety of hardwares.

This mix of shop wares remained remarkably constant from the 1660s to the 1750s, as did the number of different lines stocked by village retailers. It also characterised the stock of tradesmen with nominally different specialisms, the occupational title giving a veneer of specialisation that belied broad similarities. Some shops held a greater quantity and variety of goods, but the basic sets of merchandise were fairly consistent, even where the amount of stock was very modest. Ralph Edge, an ironmonger from Tarporley in Cheshire (d. 1683), had stock worth £248 7s 9½d including fifteen types of cloth; haberdashery, woollen caps, gloves and stockings; thimbles, pin cushions, tobacco boxes, ink horns, manacles and spectacles; ironware including pins, knives, knitting needles and curtain rings; primers, psalters, testaments and bibles; shot, candles and soap, turpentine and oil; dried fruit, seed and spices; tobacco and tobacco pipes. In contrast, Ralph Hulme (d.1684) had just £3 10s 6d of goods in his Woodford shop.²² Yet both were operating essentially as general stores for their local communities – a practice that was also true of many substantial shops in provincial towns.²³ This generalist approach might be seen as indicative of an underdeveloped retail system or an inferior class of retailer, but a mix of products had the obvious advantage of maximising the potential for custom. Moreover, it did not preclude variety and choice within particular lines. For example, John Robins (d.1709) offered his customers white sugar, brown sugar and sugar candy, plus

¹⁹ Holderness, 'Rural tradesmen', 78; Winstanley, *Shopkeeper's world*, 202.

²⁰ Coghill, *Piers Plowman*, 40.

²¹ Cornwall Record Office (CRO), William Bastard (1720); Kent History and Library centre (KHLC), 11/45/227, William Partridge (1681).

²² Cheshire Archives and Local Studies (CALs), WS 1683, Ralph Edge; WS 1684, Ralph Hulme.

²³ See Fowler, 'Provincial retail practice'; Stobart and Hann, 'Retail revolution'.

common raisins and raisins of the sun; Ralph Edge's stock included five different types of cap, four sorts of pepper, and four grades of tobacco, and Richard Smith (d.1716), a mercer from Bunbury in Cheshire, stocked twenty different types of fabric, including eleven types of woollens, four of linens and a variety of mixed fabrics.²⁴

[Table 1 here]

Three things are significant here. First, many of these goods came from across the world. Far from being isolated, rural consumers in the early decades of the eighteenth century were directly linked into global systems of supply. Second, and closely linked to this, village shops went far beyond supplying simply the basic and everyday needs of rural dwellers. If they were 'department stores in miniature', as Winstanley suggests, then this ran to their ability to supply small luxuries as well as necessities.²⁵ Third, these were clearly the goods in demand from villagers up and down the country, suggesting that village shopkeepers were attuned to their customers and would stock new lines when demand was sufficient. At the very least, then, village shops facilitated access to an expanding world of goods, rather than simply servicing day-to-day needs and were thus instrumental in shifting patterns of rural consumption. These may have changed more slowly than in towns, but they were far from stagnant, even amongst the very poorest.²⁶

Village shops sold novel items, including imported textiles and the so-called new groceries. We thus see Ralph Edge stocking printed paragon and calicos in the late seventeenth century, a time when such goods were still novelties in the English home. By the 1720s, tea and coffee were being sold in a number of village shops (see Table 1), including those of Nathaniel Jordan (d.1720) in Kent and James Hollis (d.1723) in Northamptonshire. A generation later, these new groceries were central to the stock of Ann Gomm's shop in Shipton-under-Wychwood and were being joined on the shelves of certain village shops by patent medicines; Thomas Wright (d.1756), for example, sold Daffy's Elixir from his shop in Burton Latimer, Northamptonshire.²⁷ Recent research has cast some doubt on Shammas's earlier argument for the importance of these goods in underpinning the viability of country shops and promoting a growth in rural retailing.²⁸ Nonetheless, it is apparent that at least some of the burgeoning demand for these things was met by local suppliers. In the 1770s, Samuel Finney noted not only that the

²⁴ CRO, John Robins (1709); CALS, WS 1683, Ralph Edge; WS 1716, Richard Smith.

²⁵ Winstanley, *Shopkeeper's world*, 202.

²⁶ See King 'Pauper inventories'; Harley, 'Material lives'.

²⁷ KHLC, 11/75/92, Nathaniel Jordan (1720); Northamptonshire Record Office (NRO), 1723, James Hollis; Oxford Record Office (ORO), OA/B/118; NRO, 1756, Thomas Wright.

²⁸ Shammas, *Pre-industrial consumer*, 259. For a critique, see Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 41-64.

increasingly prosperous and market-oriented industrial workers of rural north-east Cheshire looked to spend their wages on a range of novel consumer goods – tea, printed cottons, silk waistcoats and laced caps – but also that they acquired these within their neighbourhoods.²⁹

In the early to mid nineteenth century, rural shops retained their role as a multifarious general shop or *omnium gatherum*. Analysis of the ledgers of three village shops shows a diversity of merchandise, similar to that seen in inventories one hundred years earlier and reveals that wide-ranging stock still defied seemingly unambiguous occupational titles. Between them they carried 243 different types of stock or service, the core business being complemented by a wide array of other goods, from bread to books and from tea to tableware.³⁰ George Hooper in Windrush, Gloucestershire, was identified as a baker, but he also sold meat, cheese, eggs, groceries, candles and soap, and the shop became a grocery and drapery when run by his daughters in the 1870s and 1880s; Rebecca Course of Tingewick in Buckinghamshire was also identified as a baker, yet stocked groceries, fruit and vegetables, drapery and haberdashery, clothing and shoes, household cleaning products, brushes and brooms, tableware, and gunpowder and shot; and Charles Small, a grocer and butcher from Great Chart in Kent, sold a similar array of goods in addition to a wide range of meat. This suggests that rural shopkeepers were still intent on catering for as many of the everyday needs of their customers as possible, despite what their occupational titles might suggest. Course was a ‘baker’ just as Edge was an ‘ironmonger’ – their title identified a core stock and expertise around which many other goods were assembled and sold. That said, offering such a wide variety of goods carried some risk, the slow movement of certain goods and the accumulation of dead stock over time remained a problem for shopkeepers as they attempted to ensure readiness for any request.³¹ The potential for this is apparent in George Hooper’s ledgers. These show that the ten most frequently purchased items made up 96 per cent of all the purchases made by his regular customers. Clearly, his other forty or so lines were bought less frequently, tying up capital in slow-moving stock.³²

²⁹ See Ashton, *Economic History of England*, 214-16.

³⁰ Gloucestershire Archives (GA), D1522/2/6-7, credit ledgers of George Hooper of Windrush, Gloucestershire, 1848-54; Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies (CBS), Q/DA/96/3, credit ledger of Rebecca Course of Tingewick, Buckinghamshire, 1838-40; Kent History and Library Centre (KHLIC), Q/CI/296/10-13, credit ledgers of Charles Small of Great Chart, Kent, 1834-42. The figure of 243 is a minimum as it only relates to credit sales; various entries merely state ‘goods’ or ‘drapery goods’ and a small number of items were indecipherable.

³¹ For example see Burne, *Parson and peasant*, 143.

³² GA, D1522/2/6-7. A regular customer is defined as one for whom a full year of custom can be identified within the period covered by the ledgers (1848-54). 69 regular customers were identified from a total of

Despite such problems and a high degree of continuity in terms of shop goods, these early-Victorian retailers sold a variety of products that were not listed in the stock inventories of village shops 100 years earlier. Amongst these were the bird seed, cups and saucers, matches, and unspecified 'pills' sold by Charles Small, and the aprons, bonnets, sand paper and sugar plums in Rebecca Course's shop. By the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s, we find tinned fish and meats; branded biscuits, matches and candles; powdered eggs, and many other new lines amongst the stock of the village stores in Sonning, Berkshire and the Windrush shop run by Elizabeth and Ann, George Hooper's daughters.³³ These were scarcely luxuries, but they show how village shops were instrumental in bringing urban products into the countryside, helping to supply and perhaps stimulate new demands. In this sense, they were part of a broader 'consumer revolution' in the countryside.

Not everything changed, of course: one of James Hollis' customers, transported forward in time to Rebecca Course's shop would have found much that was familiar in the goods on offer. They would also have recognised and understood the range of other services offered by mid-nineteenth century village shops. Charles Small's ledger, for example, records payments for killing livestock belonging to his customers (to be expected of a butcher), and also mending baskets and mangling clothes. It is quite possible that these activities were undertaken by other members of his household, but this kind of diversification reveals a thorough and wide-ranging engagement with the local community of the kind seen with William Wood in late eighteenth-century Cheshire.³⁴ It also underlines the continued importance of by-employments to the oeconomy of rural households. Dual or multiple occupations/incomes were, according to Wrigley, a characteristic feature of the rural economy.³⁵ His attention was centred on production and the growing body of rural labour that was focused, at least for part of the time, on craft or workshop production. Such activities link to ideas of proto-industrialisation, but also to de Vries' industrious revolution, wherein households broadened their engagement with the market and funded their desire for more consumer goods through this greater commercial activity.³⁶ Multiple occupations also characterised the rural retail sector, although not to the

156; they made 6676 purchases between them, 6439 relating to loaves, flour, bacon, cheese, baking of loaves, cakes, bran, salt, dough and lard (96 per cent).

³³ KHLC, Q/CI/296/10-13; Museum of English Rural Life (MERL): D86/7, Account book of 'village stores' in Sonning, Berkshire, 1863-75; CBS, Q/DA/96/3; GA, D1522/2/8, Credit ledger of Elizabeth Hooper, 1882-86.

³⁴ Wood's varied business is discussed in: Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 211-16; Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, passim; Stobart, *Sugar and spice*, 154-7.

³⁵ Wrigley, 'Urban growth'.

³⁶ De Vries, *Industrious Revolution*, esp. 9-20.

extent that was seen in rural crafts. Anecdotally, we can see this in the lives of men like Thomas Turner, who was a schoolmaster, undertaker, tax-gatherer, churchwarden and overseer of the poor as well as running his shop in the Sussex village of East Hoathly. Rather more prosaically, perhaps, William Wood ran an alehouse alongside his shop in Didsbury; he also owned enough land to make it worthwhile engaging others to do some of the tilling and harvesting – often as a way of dispersing some of their debts with him.³⁷ This practice is revealing in that it suggests that his indoor activities were more important; they are what occupied his time.

This impression of shopkeepers focusing on their retail business comes through in probate evidence as well. Seventeenth-century Kent was characterised by a number of yeoman-shopkeepers, men like Nicholas Pay of Minster (d.1681), whose inventory listed four horses, three cows, six hogs, seven wagons and carts, and a total of 32 acres of land sown with wheat, peas, barley and beans in addition to his shop goods.³⁸ From a total inventoried wealth of £279 3s 11d, his farming activities accounted for £122 17s (44 percent) and his shop goods £64 19s 4d (23 percent). Yet Pay was unusual both in the scale of his farming activities and the extent to which these dominated his inventory. In Cheshire, around one-fifth of the shopkeepers had no livestock or husbandry ware when they died and most owned just a very small number of cows or a few chickens and pigs, together with corn and hay to feed them (Table 2). When we exclude butchers, engagement with agriculture decreases markedly, a single cow being the most that many shopkeepers had listed in their inventories. The sample size here is very small and we must therefore treat any conclusions with caution, but this relatively low level of ownership stood in stark contrast with craftsmen, many of whom had substantial holdings of livestock.³⁹ This suggests that shopkeepers, narrowly defined, were much less engaged in the agricultural economy than many of their neighbours, even those whose principal occupation lay outside farming. This suggests a rather different relationship within the rural community – one that involved the provision of non-local produce and links to urban suppliers and enhanced the potential of the village shop as an agent of consumer change.⁴⁰

[Table 2 here]

Tracing these patterns forward into the nineteenth century is difficult, especially given the changing nature of the sources available. Trade directories can highlight the varied nature of an individual's business, or perhaps more correctly the household economy, by listing people under more than one heading and/or itemising several trades for a given individual. The extent

³⁷ Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*; Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 211-16.

³⁸ KHLC, 18/7/1681, Nicholas Pay (1681).

³⁹ Stobart, 'Craftsmen-retailers'.

⁴⁰ See Stobart, 'Village shop'.

to which multiple income streams remained important to rural shopkeepers is quite striking: about one in seven villages in mid-nineteenth-century Gloucestershire, Kent and Buckinghamshire contained individuals listed as farmer-retailers (Table 3). This suggests that shopkeepers' involvement in agriculture was still a feature of rural communities well into the nineteenth century – one sufficiently important for some to advertise the fact in trade directories. That said, only a very small proportion of shopkeepers were listed in this way: just 4 percent across the three counties, and almost half the total being accounted for by butcher-farmers. Although some undoubtedly kept a small amount of livestock without listing themselves as farmers, this underlines the position of village shopkeepers (other than butchers) as somewhat removed from direct involvement in the agricultural economy. Indeed, the incompatibility of the two activities – one requiring presence indoors and the other outdoors – means that it probably made practical sense only if the roles were split between different household members.

[Table 3 here]

There were, of course, many other occupations with which retailing could be combined. In early eighteenth-century Northamptonshire, James Hollis' grocery shop sold earthenware, hardware and haberdashery as well as groceries; but he also had a workshop containing leather, tools and lasts, and readymade shoes and boots. Working out precisely how such businesses ran alongside one another is impossible from inventory evidence alone, but it seems most likely that it relied on the labour of both husband and wife. It would certainly have been impossible for Hollis to have also tended his nine sheep, two hogs and fowls whilst running two businesses that had combined book debts of £59 7s 4d.⁴¹ 120 years later, much the same was true of Charles Small. He appears in Pigot's 1839 directory and the 1841 census as a grocer, but is also listed in the former as a butcher which, from his ledger, appears to have been his main line of business.⁴² We cannot know for certain, but it was probably his wife, Frances, who effectively ran the shop – a practice which remained widespread amongst small shopkeepers in town and country alike.⁴³

This was certainly the case with many rural post offices, which proliferated through the middle decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁴ The creation of a national postal service required the setting up of a system of sub-post offices and at mid-century, whilst a significant number were

⁴¹ NRO, James Hollis, 1723.

⁴² Census of England: Kent: Great Chart (1841); *Pigot and Co.'s Royal National and Commercial Directory and Topography of the Counties of Kent, Surrey, Sussex* (London, 1839), 241-2.

⁴³ Barker, *Business of women*; Haggerty, 'Women, work'; H.UU., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers*, 40-43.

⁴⁴ Bailey, 'The village shop', 102-3; Stray, *Post Offices*, 13.

run in their own right, the majority were combined with retailing or at least one other trade (Table 4). Despite the hard work that it entailed, beset by rules and regulations, offering such a service presented opportunities for some financial security arising from the regularity of trade and the flow of people to the shop. This was acknowledged by Hardy Woolley, a village shopkeeper in Moulton in Lincolnshire, who wrote two books of trade hints for country shopkeepers. He noted that: '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 nucleous [sic] for business'.⁴⁵ This argument appears to have held particular weight in Kent, where a much greater proportion of post offices were listed in combination with shops. Again, though, some caution is needed: a link with shopkeeping was far from axiomatic, post offices being run by individuals engaged in a wide array of other occupations.

[Table 4 here]

Those rural shopkeepers who engaged in dual or multiple occupations clearly had access to other resources which provided some financial resilience in the face of the numerous challenges which presented themselves as the century progressed. Indeed, it might be argued that it was the key to survival for part-time shopkeepers whose income from retailing would rarely support the household. This is a familiar trope from studies of back-street urban shopkeeping which was seen as having low entry thresholds in terms of skills and capital.⁴⁶ Both here and in a rural context, proliferation added to numbers without transforming retailing; contrary to the argument of Van Den Heuvel and Oglivie, it might even be seen as having a deadening effect on innovation and efficiency.⁴⁷ Yet such a view is unduly pessimistic. Douglas McCalla is explicit about the benefits of a mixed economy to rural stores in early nineteenth-century Canada and there is evidence to suggest that some part-time shopkeepers in England were innovative and enterprising.⁴⁸ Hardy Woolley, for example, combined his occupation as a grocer, druggist and postmaster with successful authorship, the second of his two trade guides, which were aimed at other provincial grocers, running for at least four editions.⁴⁹

Diversification, then, could involve dynamism and considerable entrepreneurship. Equally, there were specialists who prospered in a rural setting. Selling only textiles, the Bunbury mercer, Richard Smith (d.1713), operated a large and successful business. His appraisers made

⁴⁵ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 39.

⁴⁶ Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 203.

⁴⁷ Van Den Heuvel and Oglivie, 'Retail development'. See also Blondé and Van Damme, 'Retail growth'.

⁴⁸ McCalla, 'We ain't "gentlemen" merchants'.

⁴⁹ H.U.U., *Hints for Country Shopkeepers; Woolley, Woolley's Trade*.

a separate list of 289 debts already collected in by his widow, Jane Smith and 145 that were still outstanding. They ranged in size from the 2d collected from Edward Gregory and 2d still owing from Hannah Betterley, to £6 5s 5½d collected in three payments from Mr Low and £6 10d outstanding from Thomas Wilbraham. With over 400 customers, the business was both large and had considerable range, Smith drawing customers from his own village and many of the surrounding parishes. His reach may not have matched that of contemporary urban retailers, but nonetheless he served an area of at least 50 square miles, offering village folk easy access to a wide variety textiles and haberdashery.⁵⁰

The 'reach' of village shops has rarely been considered, yet it is fundamental to many of the key questions about rural retailing during this period. The assumption that shops served only their immediate locality, in which they held a monopoly of supply, is both deep-seated and manifestly false. In early eighteenth-century Bunbury, there was at least one other shop in addition to Smith's, and a butcher is also listed in the calendar of probate records. By the late eighteenth century, the first directories indicate that several Cheshire villages were served by two or more shops. In 1783, there were at least six shopkeepers and two butchers in Tarporley; four shopkeepers and a butcher in Over; a grocer and two butchers in Tarvin and three shopkeepers in Parkgate.⁵¹ These were all substantial villages, some of them (like Tarporley) at the margins of urban status, but retailers were present in a much greater number of places, as the shop tax returns make clear (Table 5). Taxable shops were found in a total of 57 places in Cheshire, of which a maximum of fourteen and probably eleven or twelve could be regarded as towns by this date. The way in which the shop tax was calculated (different rates being levied depending on the size of the shop) makes it difficult to determine the exact number of shops in any settlement, but it is likely that only the bottom category (where less than 2s was payable) comprised places with only one taxable shop. Even in these 20 villages it is quite possible that other, non-taxed shops were operating since many retailers escaped the notice of the appraisers.⁵² More importantly, the density of coverage across much of the county was such that most villagers could access at least two taxable shops by travelling three miles or less. In such circumstances, any notion of the monopolistic village shop quickly becomes untenable.

[Table 5 here]

Two generations later, the situation had changed little, despite a growing clamour against the exploitative village shopkeeper who was accused of entrapping poor rural labourers in a relationship of credit dependency – an anxiety fuelled by the negative rhetoric of various

⁵⁰ CALS, WS1713 Richard Smith.

⁵¹ *Cowdroy's Directory of Cheshire*, 1789.

⁵² Mitchell, 'Pitt's shop tax'.

newspaper articles, pamphlets and serialised novels.⁵³ Analysis of Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire and Kent trade directories shows that there may have been a retail monopoly in around one quarter of villages, but only if this is defined as the place having either one shop or two shops with very different occupational titles (Table 6). Of course, this assumes that different retail occupations meant different arrays of shop goods, which we have already noted was often not the case. More importantly, it assumes that rural dwellers, both rich and poor, were unable to buy things anywhere other than the shops in their own village – something which is manifestly untrue. The credit ledgers of George Hooper, for example, show that he was attracting customers from the nearby village of Sherborne, which had its own baker, and from a range of other places. Indeed, nearly half of his credit customers lived outside the parish and anything up to 10 miles distant.⁵⁴ Like Richard Smith 120 years earlier, Hooper’s market area thus overlapped with many other shops, bringing them into competition with each other. Similarly, the rural tailor, Robert Mansbridge of Basing in Hampshire, had a catchment area of over sixty square miles.⁵⁵ Moreover, there were itinerant traders who brought goods into the village or the possibility of making a short journey to a market town. Monopolies were thus very difficult to sustain, especially when the most enterprising rural shopkeepers actively sought customers outside their parish. For example, Samuel Budgett (1794-1851), who ended up as a successful Bristol wholesale merchant, began his retail career as an apprentice in his brother’s village shop in Kingswood. He built up the business in part by travelling to neighbouring villages to take orders, bringing him into direct competition with the shopkeepers there.⁵⁶

[Table 6 here]

In summary, village shops could be substantial businesses with considerable geographical reach and with an impressive stock of everyday items – including a growing array of imported, processed and branded goods – as well as occasional luxuries. As in towns, of course, the scale of operation varied considerably. They were rarely monopolists and had to compete not just with markets, fairs, urban shops and itinerants, but also with other village shops. The logic of this is that they could not simply wait for customers to come along; rather, they had to be wooed with appropriate and attractive goods that were of good quality, well-priced and effectively marketed. Yet this flies in the face of the stereotype of the local and lazy monopolist who often

⁵³ For example, see Domino, ‘Matthews’, 404. For fuller discussion, see Bailey, ‘The village shop’, 83-7.

⁵⁴ GA: D1522/2/6-7. The location of 120 of the 156 credit customers has been identified, 55 (46%) being outside the parish of Windrush.

⁵⁵ Fowler, ‘Robert Mansbridge, a rural tailor’, 30.

⁵⁶ Arthur, *The successful merchant*, 154.

exploited their customers through poor quality goods, high prices and unfair credit practices.⁵⁷ Which of these is true? And how does this help to tie (or not) the village shopkeeper into wider processes of retail modernisation?

II

Credit was central to the economy of town and country alike: it facilitated everyday transactions and helped to define a person's status and standing in society. As both Muldrew and Finn argue, it shaped ideas of honour and character; being in good credit meant having good standing in society and with one's neighbours. Judging creditworthiness thus meant assessing an individual's character and reputation, and was a social as much as an economic action, linked to family and community as well as income or solvency.⁵⁸ As Cox makes clear, this could be a fraught process for early-modern shopkeepers as the provision and management of credit was critical to the success of their business.⁵⁹ Both processes were important: judging a potential customer's standing and credit-worthiness, and calling in accounts when they needed to be settled. The Lancaster grocer, William Stout, reviewing his first year in business, clearly felt that he had got the balance wrong, lamenting that he had been 'too forward in trusting and too backward in calling, as is too frequent in young tradesmen'.⁶⁰ A little earlier, Roger Lowe, who kept shop in a small village in southern Lancashire, found the process of calling in debts to be irksome and time-consuming – chasing customers for payment took him away from the shop, thus limiting his opportunity to make sales.⁶¹ And there were moral dilemmas to be wrestled with; Thomas Turner agonised for years about how to deal with Mr Darby, who owed him £18 18s in the final reckoning, and he hesitated at the last minute when executing an order for distraining Darby's goods. He balanced the family's worth (noting that 'no people of £200 a year go gayer than Mrs Darby and her two daughters'), the distress he would cause and his obligation to the system, writing that 'I think if I do not do it now, I am doing a piece of injustice both to myself and creditors'.⁶²

Turner was clear that Darby's unpaid account was substantial, but appears to have been less certain of its precise value. In opening the action against him, the shopkeeper noted that: 'the

⁵⁷ Bailey, 'The village shop', chapter 3.

⁵⁸ Muldrew, *Economy of Obligation*; Finn, *Character of Credit*.

⁵⁹ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 146-62. See also Alexander, *Retailing*, 114-15; Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 146-57.

⁶⁰ Stout, *Autobiography*, 96.

⁶¹ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 133.

⁶² Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 22 May 1758, 6 July 1762.

debt I swore to be due to me is £17, though I am pretty confident it is more than £18'.⁶³ This perhaps reflects the less than perfect nature of his book keeping, the quality and thoroughness of shop accounts being very variable during this period. Ideally, a double book system would be deployed, sales being recorded as they took place in a day book and later transferred to the individual customer's pages in a consolidated account book.⁶⁴ Most surviving account books for village shops effectively collapse these two into the same book, a practice which continued into the nineteenth century. But this does not mean that shopkeepers were unable to track and account the spending by each account customer. Indeed, all of the account books analysed here follow a standard practice of periodically totting up each customer's account and then scoring it through as payment was made. The period and amount of credit allowed varied between customers, as is apparent from the 1790s account book of an anonymous grocer in the Northamptonshire village of Greens Norton. Some customers settled their accounts in full each week; some were given up to three months credit, and others were allowed to effectively service their debt rather than pay it in full. The same can be found in George Hooper's accounts half a century later.⁶⁵

In essence, little changed in these practices through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, in large part because it was a system that worked smoothly enough in most instances. Occasionally, we see rural shopkeepers actively managing accounts when their customers failed to make adequate payments. For example, James Cash, a regular customer of William Wood of Didsbury, had accumulated a debt of £3 2s 1½d when Wood drew up his account on 12 February 1787. He paid £1 1s of this and continued to buy on credit over the next month, purchasing over £1 worth of goods and raising his account to £3 4s 10½d by 13 March. No payment was made against this amount and for the next two months spending was limited to a total of just 12s 1¼d, about one quarter of the previous level. On 15 May, he paid £2 12s 6d and from June returned to the earlier pattern of spending and payments.⁶⁶ We cannot be certain, but it appears that Wood may have been limiting his credit until Cash made a payment against his outstanding balance. Such practices had much in common with those of urban shopkeepers, suggesting that village shops were in tune with the standard business practices of the day.⁶⁷ Their close social and geographical proximity to their customers did not, it seems, induce any departure from the norms of carefully calibrated trust and credit.

⁶³ Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 22 May 1758.

⁶⁴ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 148-53.

⁶⁵ NRO, Y.Z.4040, ff.13-14, 43-5; GA, D1522/2/6-7.

⁶⁶ Manchester Archives and Local Studies (MALS), M62/1/1-3, ff.17-18.

⁶⁷ See Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 182-3.

There was good reason for this cautious approach because it was quite possible for customers to ignore their obligations and turn to other shops. This was a problem which troubled Thomas Turner and is confirmed in some account books. Although the evidence is difficult to interpret with certainty, there are several instances where accounts seem to stop without the balance being paid off. At Rebecca Course's shop in Tingewick, for example, the credit purchases of Richard Smith, a local glover, abruptly stopped on 28th November 1838, leaving a substantial balance of £15-18-11½ owing on the account. The following January a bushel of peas and four bushels of wheat were supplied by Smith (evidence of the continued importance of payments in kind). These reduced the debt to £13 12 5½, but as the balance is not crossed out it is likely that it was never settled, contributing to Rebecca Course's insolvency a few years later. Similarly, Mrs Smith, who visited the shop at least every other day, appears to have ceased buying in April 1839 owing £3 9 11½ in addition to the large debt of £13 12 5½ owed by her husband, the 'late Mr Smith'. These might represent customers who chose to switch to other suppliers, although some accounts might have been continued into other ledgers which have not survived or the customer may have died, as Mr Smith had done, leaving the shopkeeper with the arduous task of collecting outstanding debts from executors or family.

It is quite clear, however, that many customers bought goods from several different shops, confirming that monopolistic supply was far from the norm. Part of Thomas Turner's complaint against Master Darby and his family was that 'They have almost quite forsaken my shop, buying nothing of me that amounts to any value, but every time they want anything of value, they go to Lewes'.⁶⁸ Samuel Holbrook was a regular customer of William Wood, visiting his shop at least once a week in 1785-7; but his account shows no entries for staples such as flour, meal, cheese, candles and treacle, which he must have been acquiring elsewhere.⁶⁹ A generation later, the bills and receipts of the Gibbards, a minor gentry family of Sharnbrook in Bedfordshire, show that they bought everyday goods, such as groceries, from various local village retailers. In the period 1816-29, they patronised a total of eleven food and drink suppliers in Sharnbrook and fifteen more in surrounding towns or London; and on at least three different occasions in 1847, they made purchases from three separate shopkeepers in the village on the same day.⁷⁰ This may indicate a willingness to shop around in search of better price or quality, but the Gibbards were

⁶⁸ Vaisey, *Thomas Turner*, 22 May 1758.

⁶⁹ MCL, MS F942, ff. 63-4.

⁷⁰ Bedfordshire and Luton Archives and Records Service (BLA): Garrard & Allen archive, (GA) 2501-3. On 6th May, 16th September and 23rd October they made purchases from William Wykes, Frances Grindon and Joseph Scrivener. Bailey, 'Squire, shopkeeper and staple food', 11-12.

also influenced in their decisions by a sense of duty and obligation to spread their patronage across a number of retailers.⁷¹

The fact that these practices remained more or less unchanged through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries might suggest that rural retailing was conservative and unchanging. However, we should be wary of looking for change for its own sake or seeing it as the only sign of an effective retail system; as Cox has argued, it is better to view retailing as a system appropriate to its time and place.⁷² At the same time, though, it would be wrong to think of village shops as by-passed by so-called 'modern' practices. Of these, fixed prices are often seen as a key tenet of any retail transformation in retailing; they allowed customers to be served more rapidly and reduced the need to rely on the skills and persistence of shop assistants to resist shoppers' attempts to cheapen goods. It is significant, then, that they were well established in village shops by the eighteenth century. Thomas Turner writes about many aspects of his shopkeeping, but haggling is not one of them. Moreover, account books show remarkably little variation in the price that each customer was charged for particular goods, suggesting that prices were effectively fixed. William Wood occasionally offered discounts for bulk orders, but other variations in price appear to be seasonal rather than a result of individual negotiation.⁷³

Prices, then, appear to have been fixed, although whether they were ticketed is less apparent. Even amongst the array of pictorial representations of village shops produced in growing numbers from the third quarter of the nineteenth century, there is little indication of price labels or even signs indicating prices. A rare example, dating from later in the Victorian era, shows a grocer's window adorned with a poster for 2 shilling tea.⁷⁴ It seems more likely that customers were aware of prices through their stability over the months and years, and through repeat purchases of similar batches of goods. This may represent a growing divide between urban and rural practices. Provincial newspapers are littered with advertisements noting a range of goods and their prices. As early as the 1730s, William Chase placed notices in the *Norwich Mercury* for snuff, ink and a range of teas, all with the prices listed.⁷⁵ Of course, it is difficult to know how widespread fixed prices were amongst those who chose not to advertise in the press; yet the promotion of urban 'high street' shops and shop goods in terms of price was

⁷¹ For fuller discussion, see Bailey, 'Consumption and status'; Bailey, 'Squire, shopkeeper and staple food'.

⁷² Cox, *Complete Tradesman*.

⁷³ Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 214-15.

⁷⁴ Anon, 'The Master of Aynhoe', *The Leisure Hour*, 1016 (17th June 1871), 369.

⁷⁵ *Norwich Mercury*, 26 March 1737, 11 June 1737.

widespread by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, in a way that does not appear to have happened in village shops.

One possible explanation for this growing divide is that the prices charged in the countryside were higher than those in town, making them less of a marketing point. The traditional image of the village shop is one where low turnover was off-set against higher prices and profits, a position which many critiques viewed as exploitation and gross profiteering; but was this true?⁷⁶ Direct comparisons of prices are problematic because of the unknown and variable quality of goods. Variations are sometimes marked by types and distinguished by nominal labels, such as bohea, souchong and hyson teas or standard, fine and superfine cloth. However, these labels were not necessarily applied consistently within one account book, let alone across different shopkeepers. That said, evidence drawn from the suppliers of the Gibbards in 1828 suggests that prices in the countryside were slightly higher, but not dramatically so. Some goods, including raisins, currants and mustard, cost the Gibbards the same whether they bought them from Thomas Grindon, their village grocer, or Robert Robinson, in nearby Bedford. However, Grindon charged half a penny per pound more for cheese and moist sugar (which equated to 5 per cent and 7 per cent extra respectively).⁷⁷ For loaf sugar, the premium was variable, according to the quantity being purchased. When the Gibbards bought 12lbs 2oz in February and 20lbs in July 1828, Grindon charged 11½d a pound, the same as Robinson; but their usual purchases of between 1lb and 3lbs cost as much as 13d per pound – a premium of 13 per cent. The difference with rice was greater still, the penny a pound extra that Grindon charged amounting to a 17 per cent difference to Robinson's price.

It is difficult to generalise from just one example, but the premium paid by the Gibbards for buying from their local village shop was probably fairly typical. Why were prices higher in the countryside? Nineteenth-century critics were quite clear that it was a reflection of the profiteering of village shopkeepers, who exploited their hapless customers. One particularly blistering attack was made in *Chambers's Journal* in August 1861, an article entitled 'The village shop' arguing that the rural poor were paying far more for their supplies because: '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

⁷⁶ Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, 500; Domino, 'Matthews', 404; BPP, *Reports of Special Assistant Poor Law Commissioners*, 140-1; Anon, 'The village shop' (1861), 97-98.

⁷⁷ BLA, (GA), 18-19. There is no evidence of prices varying during the year and Grindon offered a shorter credit period (one month) compared to Robinson (six months), suggesting that the price differences were real rather than a result of seasonal fluctuations or charges for credit. For further details see Bailey, 'The village shop', 76-7.

per cent for the accommodation he thus affords us'.⁷⁸ Testing the accuracy of this claim is very difficult, but we know that Thomas Grindon made a profit margin on the butter he sold of two pence per pound, which equated with 17-20 per cent.⁷⁹ The account book of Edward Allnatt, a grocer in the small Berkshire village of Sonning, affords a more detailed insight (Table 7). His profit margin varied considerably, from a mere 4-7 per cent for some types of candle, to a more significant 28-33 per cent for cocoa. The reasons for these differences are unclear. Unit price appears to have little bearing – the highest profit margin on candles came on mid-price 'composite' candles whilst the lowest was on the highest price spermaceti candles – so perhaps Allnatt was making some calculation about what the market would bear or about the profit margin relative to shelf life or turnover of the particular product. Whatever the situation, a median gross profit of 16 per cent puts him very much at the bottom end of the scale decried in *Chamber's Journal*, suggesting that claims of profiteering were largely overblown, a point underscored by contemporary shopkeeper-writers such as Hardy Woolley.⁸⁰ At the same time, however, his profit margin was considerably above the 5.5-10 per cent that Alexander has suggested was typical of urban retailers.⁸¹ The difference might be partly explained by rural retailers passing on the additional transport costs incurred in getting goods to their shops, but a far more important factor was the level of turnover: lower profits per item were possible if the shop had a higher throughput of customers and turnover of goods – again key tenets of retail modernity.

[Table 7 here]

One mechanism that shopkeepers could use to increase their efficiency was to sell at fixed prices and for cash only. Generally eschewed by many traditional retailers in the eighteenth century, especially those with pretence at serving the middle classes, cash sales were favoured by retailers willing to recalibrate the balance between profit margin per item and turnover; selling goods more quickly to each customer allowed prices to be set lower, thus attracting more customers into the shop. This mantra of increased efficiency was central to the advertisements

⁷⁸ Anon, 'The village shop' (1861), 97.

⁷⁹ BLA: GA18, GA20. Bills to John Gibbard, November and December 1828. They reveal that Grindon 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.

⁸⁰ Woolley, *Woolley's Trade Hints*, 28.

⁸¹ Alexander, *Retailing in England*, 169.

placed by many warehouses from the later eighteenth century onwards and is central to the efficiency savings that form the core of economic evaluations of retail revolution.⁸² Yet the actual extent and balance of cash sales amongst urban retailers remains largely obscure.

Similar problems beset attempts to assess the level of cash sales in village shops, largely because they leave little trace in the surviving records. For most rural retailers, they had long formed part of the mix of selling practices, but for some they were becoming a defining feature of their business in the early decades of the nineteenth century. For example, William Corbett of Ombersley in Worcestershire advertised on his 1828 billhead that he sold his drapery and grocery wares 'for ready money'.⁸³ Yet, to most rural shops, these 'modern' practices were unnecessary and sometimes counter-productive. For one thing, the volume of customers visiting a shop in any particular day remained fairly modest, making this kind of productivity improvement unnecessary. For another, credit remained important to rural labourers through the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries: their incomes often varied seasonally and their access to cash was often limited. Moreover, the process of shopping was sometimes leisurely and almost invariably sociable in character, so hurried sales and cash payments would have been unwelcome, despite the rhetoric of contemporary commentators who argued that cash sales and co-operative ideals would release the rural worker from the grip of the exploitative shopkeeper.⁸⁴

In many cases, then, selling was low key and emphasised personal service. Certainly, the organisation of the village shop, in common with most urban shops, was generally structured around the counter which formed the key point of exchange for goods, information and gossip.⁸⁵ Counters were present in some village shops by the middle of the seventeenth century and had become all but ubiquitous by the 1720s although Thomas Turner makes no mention of such equipment in his shop.⁸⁶ Once established, this arrangement persisted through the whole of the nineteenth century and beyond – as, indeed, it did in urban shops as well. This can be seen in various paintings and illustrations of rural shops which clearly depict the counter and other fixtures and fittings, even when the shops themselves were quite modest. For example, in William Redmore Bigg's 1809 painting, we see a shop that is clearly carved out of the family's living room, yet it has a substantial counter on which are rested the scales and weights, whilst

⁸² Jefferys, *Retail trading*, esp. 36-8; Blondé and Van Damme, 'Retail growth'.

⁸³ Worcestershire Record Office: 3572/16, billhead of William Corbett of Ombersley (1828).

⁸⁴ Anon, 'The Village Shop', 99-100; *Reports of the Society for Bettering the Condition*, 13-20, 58-9; Kaufmann, 'Social Pioneerings', 749.

⁸⁵ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, 131-5; Stobart, *Sugar and spice*, 267, 272.

⁸⁶ Stobart and Hann, 'Sites of consumption'.

behind it are two nests of drawers and a set of shelves on which are arranged a variety of containers including tea canisters.⁸⁷ This arrangement is confirmed in a variety of literary sources which also make reference to drawers, shelves, chests, crates and other storage items such as bottles and canisters.⁸⁸ Their presence implies an orderly presentation of goods which would be essential to the effective running of the business. Indeed, without some sensible storage and display arrangements, it would be impossible to find goods when they were asked for or to keep groceries fresh or textiles clean. However, this orderliness is at odds with some later nineteenth-century representations of the village shop which depict it as cluttered, cramped and smelly, the promiscuous mingling of odours forming an unwelcome assault on the senses.⁸⁹

Stobart has argued that images of orderly shops, for example on eighteenth-century trade cards, carried implicit messages of reputable shopkeepers with well-run businesses.⁹⁰ If true, then these later images of disorder can be read as a critique of the rural shopkeeper's business, one that is in line with an often patronising and sometimes downright negative view of the village shop in the early and middle decades of the nineteenth century.⁹¹ Yet this was essentially a condescending urban middle-class perspective on the rural shopping experience 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.⁹² Nevertheless, it is perfectly conceivable that many shopkeepers, both rural and urban, may have found it challenging to balance the need to stock a large range of goods with a desire to retain order. This is acknowledged by Hardy Woolley who urged his readers to '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'.⁹³

⁸⁷ William Redmore Bigg, 'The Village Shop' (1809). See also Helen Allingham, 'The Young Customers' (1875); Thomas Faed, 'From hand to mouth – he was one of the few who would not beg' (1879); Francis Donkin Bedford, 'Village Store' (1899) in Lucas, *The Book of Shops*, 23.

⁸⁸ See, for example: Anon, 'The village shop' (1861), 97-100; Anon, 'The village shop' (1896), 12-14.

⁸⁹ Domino, 'Matthews', 406; unknown artist, 'Village shop and post office', in Anon, 'Stodge and Scumble's country adventures'. For further analysis see Bailey, 'The village shop', chapter 3.

⁹⁰ Stobart, Hann and Morgan, *Spaces of consumption*, 126.

⁹¹ Bailey, 'The village shop', chapter 3.

⁹² For further info see Bailey, 'The village shop', chapter 3.

⁹³ H.UU., *Hints for country shopkeepers*, 12-13.

The continuity in spatial and functional arrangement of the shop should not be taken as a sign that village shopkeepers merely sat passively waiting for customers to come into the shop. Indeed, there are small but telling signs that at least some shopkeepers were entrepreneurial in character and active in generating retail and consumer transformation. There are records indicating the display of goods in windows of some rural shops from the early eighteenth century, for example the 'goods in the window' of Stephen Lawrence's Tregony shop, and it seems unlikely that the practice was new even then.⁹⁴ The precise nature of Lawrence's window is unclear, but it was almost certainly unglazed, not least because of the cost of glass at this time. Whilst the nature of some rural shops militated against elaborate window displays, a growing number of village retailers displayed goods to those passing the shop in a manner that mirrored practice in towns. By the nineteenth century the window was more likely to be glazed and therefore not only played a vital role in displaying wares, including novel and branded goods, but also in hosting advertisements and notices, often for a fee. Reminiscing about his early days in an English village, the celebrated Australian author, Henry Lawson, wrote that:

'The wants of the village in the way of maids, situations, houses to let or sublet, or wanted, are pasted in the post-office window, in the advertiser's own writing, at the rate of sixpence a week. 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'.⁹⁵

Local notices could also include such things as muzzling orders, appeals for vaccination volunteers, details of local subscription events, lists of killed and wounded soldiers during the Crimean War and postal prices.⁹⁶ Indeed, the importance of the village shop as a source of local, regional and national news grew with the spread of rural postal services, which often formed part of the function of village shops.

Some rural shopkeepers went further and exploited the growing culture of print media. They issued trade cards, took out advertisements in newspapers and used relatively elaborate billheads. Hardy Woolley was particularly enterprising, not only writing his own trade guides but also endorsing products in commercial advertisements printed at the back of the fourth edition of his second book, presumably with the aim of gaining business. It is likely, therefore, that he was referring to his own experiences when he wrote of the potential success of the enterprising retailer who made the most of the opportunities presented by modernity.⁹⁷ Similar entrepreneurialism was demonstrated by W.H. Pool, a grocer and draper in Chipstable in

⁹⁴ CRO, Stephen Lawrence (1721).

⁹⁵ Lawson, 'Letters to Jack Cornstalk, 191.

⁹⁶ Anon, 'A provincial post-office', 15; Anon, 'Pages from a private diary', 98; Trollope, 'Suite', 403-4.

⁹⁷ Woolley, *Woolley's trade hints*, 21-2.

Somerset. Drawing on practices well-established amongst urban grocers, he operated as an agent for branded tea and distributed hand bills – no doubt supplied by the tea merchants – which promoted both the tea and his shop as the place at which they could be acquired.⁹⁸ This encapsulates the way in which village shopkeepers were open to change and innovation, whilst following well-established modes of selling. They balanced innovation and tradition in a manner that was consonant with the nature of their businesses.

III

To what extent, then, were village shops caught up in the broader transformation of retailing and operating as agents of change in rural consumption practices? Their presence in some very modest sized villages and growing numbers through the eighteenth and early nineteenth century is already well established. This did not mean that every village and hamlet had its own shop, but it did mean that they were within easy reach of much of the rural population. The world of goods thus penetrated deep into the heart of rural England; villagers could visit nearby towns but also acquire a wide range of goods more locally, including novel items such as tea and, later, branded goods. These were stored, displayed and sold using equipment that was in line with that deployed in urban shops: there were shelves for display, drawers and canisters for storage and counters on which goods were laid and opinions and gossip exchanged. Evidence from account books and ledgers indicates that prices were fixed, at least for everyday consumables, and some rural shopkeepers were advertising ready cash sales by the mid nineteenth century.

These measures get us much closer to retail revolution than do numbers of shops, any transformation being qualitative as much as quantitative. They show that village shops were vibrant and dynamic places, integral to broader processes of modernisation. However, as with urban retailing, change was patchy and contingent. New goods were introduced, but this was balanced by the provision of a wide range of stock that remained more or less stable over time. ‘General store’ defined most village shops from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century and beyond and was a *modus operandi* that clearly worked, despite the mocking tone of urban middle-class literature. It allowed village shopkeepers to bring a huge variety of goods to the rural consumer – thus offering choice and facilitating engagement with market provision of everyday necessities and semi-luxuries alike – and made village shops viable as businesses.

⁹⁸ MERL, P POOL AC1/3-5, Handbills of Meikle & Passmore overprinted with Chipstable retailer’s details. For details on agency selling of tea, see Mui and Mui, *Shops and shopkeeping*, 221-48; for discussion of the business practices of a nineteenth-century business selling through agents, see Harding, ‘Competition’.

Shammas has highlighted the importance of ‘new groceries’ to the spread of country retailers, but it was the sale of a varied basket of goods that was central to the success of William Wood and many other village shopkeepers.⁹⁹ Neither this nor the continued practice of dual occupations, including farming but also running a post-office, should therefore be read as anti-modern.¹⁰⁰

Selling practices also combined innovation and tradition, credit sales being central to the businesses of Roger Lowe in the 1660s, William Wood in the 1790s, and Rebecca Course in the 1830s, but then much the same was true of many urban shops, despite the heady rhetoric about the primacy and modernity of cash sales. Moreover, whilst some rural shops enjoyed a substantial customer base and served customers from surrounding villages as well as their own, most were modest in size and were essentially family businesses. Combined with an emphasis on service and the personal nature of the relationship enjoyed with customers who were also neighbours, this prevented village shopkeepers from making or perhaps even contemplating the practices that underpinned the efficiency savings that were central to Jefferys’ conception of a retail revolution. But then there was little need for such efficiencies.

This brings us to a key point: the need to be wary of judging rural shops, against the contested and problematic standards of (urban) modernity. Village retailers provided spaces, services and goods that were appropriate to their customer base. Indeed, their continued presence through the period studied here is a testimony to the fact that they were providing in an effective manner for real needs and wants amongst the rural population. Like most urban shops, they moved with the times in ways that were useful and necessary, rather than revolutionary. And this leads to a second key point: that we should be cautious in drawing firm distinctions between rural and urban shops. Small back street shops in town probably had more in common with their rural counterparts than with the emporia, multiples and department stores of the high street. In drawing village shops into the spotlight, we thus argue that our understanding of retail history should be further modified to recognise the spatial, social and topographical contingency of change and to strip away the layers of expectation built up by an over-concentration on the urban high street as much as the department store.

⁹⁹ See Stobart, *Sugar and Spice*, 202.

¹⁰⁰ Bailey, ‘The village shop’, chapter 4.