The Study of British Retail History: Progress and Agenda

This is an author pre-publication version of the following book chapter. Please refer to the published book chapter if citing:

Andrew Alexander*


Abstract:
This chapter analyses key contributions to the study of the history of retailing in Britain, including some of the latest research. It has a particular focus on studies of retailing in the period after 1850, and considers the links between these and research into retailing in earlier periods. The chapter explores a number of themes including the impact of the enhanced interest in the study of consumption, growing interest in studying retail history in a widening variety of trades, the changing power of retailers in the supply chain and the significance of internationalisation. It concludes with recommendations for further research.

Author Biography:
Andrew Alexander is Professor of Retail Management, Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK. He has published widely on retail history and consumers’ reactions to retail innovations, with a focus on large-scale retailing and most recently the supermarket. He is on the Editorial Advisory Board of the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*.

*Address for correspondence:
Andrew Alexander
Surrey Business School
University of Surrey
Guildford,
GU2 7XH
Email: A.Alexander@surrey.ac.uk
CHAPTER 9

The Study of British Retail History: Progress and Agenda¹

Introduction

The importance and indeed attraction of the history of retailing is illustrated by the current interest shown by the mass media, with, for example, a number of TV series portraying aspects of retailing and shopping in bygone periods. Alongside period dramas like ITV’s *Mr Selfridge*, based on the life of Harry Gordon Selfridge and his London department store in the early twentieth century, factual histories such as the BBC’s series on the lives and work of *Shopgirls*, presented by historian Pamela Cox, with accompanying book (Cox and Hobley, 2014), provide the interested viewer with insights into the history of the retail sector and those who worked in it.

Those interested in the history of retailing can gain further insight from new business histories of some of the country’s larger and well-known retailing businesses. Examples include those of Tesco (Ryle, 2013), The Co-operative Group (Wilson *et al.*, 2013), and shoe manufacturer and retailer Clarks (Palmer, 2013). New research is also helping us to develop our understanding of far less well known firms. For example, Tyler’s (2014) study of the development of the multiple (chain store) corn merchant Sanders Bros., the store network of which grew to 263 stores by 1937, and of its demise in the first half of the 1950s, helps in part to address the longstanding criticism of survivor bias in the study of business history (Jones, 2008). Similarly, studies such as Heal’s (2014) history of Sir Ambrose Heal – a designer, manufacturer and retailer of furniture – point to an increased interest in a wider variety of trades among academics concerned with the history of the retail sector, a theme returned
to later in this chapter. This greater academic interest is also reflected in the volumes of a specialist book series on the history of retailing and consumption published by Ashgate, by the journals the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* (first published by Emerald in 2009) and the *History of Retailing and Consumption* (first published by Taylor & Francis in 2015), and by the CHORD conference series organised by the University of Wolverhampton.

Many of the business histories mentioned above draw upon archival sources, and the custodians of a number of archives related to the retail industry are seeking to enhance accessibility to their collections. In the case of Marks and Spencer, for example, the archive was opened to the public following its relocation to the University of Leeds. The digitisation of sources and the publication of online catalogues are also improving accessibility. The catalogue of the archive of grocery retailer J. Sainsbury became available online in 2014, following the earlier digitisation and uploading to the internet of the company’s in-house magazine. Of course many retailers, including Britain’s largest, Tesco, have no comparable business archives. However, in the case of Tesco, a collection of oral histories commissioned by the firm is now available to the public as part of the British Library’s Sound Archive, and offers useful material for both business and social historians alike.

Given the level of activity and interest in the history of retailing at present, the invitation to write a chapter reviewing current progress and debates in British retail history in the modern period seems timely. Previous reviews of work in the field exist, of course (for example, Shaw, 1992; Alexander and Akehurst, 1999; Benson and Ugolini, 2003; Tadajewski and Jones, 2014), and it is widely accepted that academic study of the history of retailing is now no longer as “under-valued and under-explored” as was argued with some justification in a review of the field towards the end of the last millennium (Alexander and Akehurst, 1999, p1). A quick overview of the more recent literature on retail history reveals that the kaleidoscope of perspectives and approaches remarked upon in a previous review remains (Shaw, 1992). Indeed the disciplines contributing to the debate now extend beyond those such as economics, history, business and management studies and
geography, all widely mentioned in past reviews of the field, to include contributions from disciplinary and subject areas such as English, cultural studies and design studies. The inherently multi-disciplinary nature of the field continues to create opportunities for new debate and for the reassessment of existing arguments, as well as the incorporation of new methodologies. Nonetheless, there remains a concern that insufficient truly inter-disciplinary studies will result in a failure to exploit potential synergies between approaches.

This chapter focuses in particular upon some of the more recent research on retailing history in the modern era, and predominantly after 1850. Even within this remit it is necessarily selective; for example, it does not consider the history of retail banking (see Newton, 2009, for a discussion of this sector in the twentieth century). In terms of developing an understanding of geographical context, this chapter is best read alongside others in the volume, including Barry Boothman’s work on North American retail history (Chapter 8) and the contributions on country-specific marketing histories, especially Chapter 17 on British marketing history. That said, this does not mean that the chapter is narrow in terms of the debates encountered. First, whilst the focus is largely on studies of the history of retailing in the period after 1850, a period that witnessed the rapid growth of large-scale retailers such as the multiple and department store firms, the chapter begins with a brief consideration of recent research into the history of retailing in the period before 1850, and particularly that focused on retailing during the long eighteenth century. This is a vibrant area of research, and is important to our understanding of the degree of both continuity and change between retailing in this period and that which provides the main focus of this chapter. Second, the study of the retail sector, including but not only in relation to historical analysis, has benefitted from a surge of interest in the theme of consumption among academics across a range of disciplines, opening up new lines of enquiry and also new and sometimes competing interpretations of how we should frame the study of retail history. Third, an analysis of British retail history must also include a consideration of the influence of the processes of internationalisation upon the sector, a theme considered in more detail later in the chapter.
Early modern and modern retailing: continuities and changes

A now established theme within the literature is that earlier studies of the retail industry often inadequately reflected and addressed the extent and modern characteristics of the retail system in the period before 1850. That shop-based retailing, including that of petty retailers, had developed to a far greater extent and in a wider diversity of trades in eighteenth century England than had previously been acknowledged was demonstrated by Mui and Mui (1989). They highlighted regional variations in the level of shop development and argued that that the practices of these retailers were more innovative than hitherto acknowledged. More recent studies have sought to provide further detail and explanation as to the development of fixed-shop retailing at both the inter-urban and intra-urban scale (see, for example, Stobart and Hann, 2004; see also Stobart, 2014; Walsh, 2014).

Turning to the debate on the characteristics of retail practice, Cox’s (2000) study of retailing in the period before 1820 provides considerable evidence to challenge the perception of retailing at this time as being somewhat primitive. Exploring retailing in the eighteenth century, she identifies increasing adoption of practices previously more associated with later periods; available sources suggest that many shops were increasing in size and in the sophistication of their interior design and layout, with glazed shop windows becoming more common (Cox and Walsh, 2000; see also Edwards, 2005; Riello, 2006). These changes at once reflected and encouraged new practices of retail salesmanship. Retailers often relied upon handbills and trade cards to promote their shops, although it seems that an increasing volume of printed newspaper advertising, particularly of branded goods, had the effect of encouraging fixed price and cash sales in some areas of trade, another practice hitherto more commonly associated with retailing in later historical periods (Cox and Walsh, 2000; Walsh, 2000).
The interest in exploring the intersections between consumption and retailing defines many of the recent studies of retailing in the period before 1850. Consequently, most display a broader remit than typical business or marketing histories. Nonetheless, they can provide valuable insight into the development of the retail sector, for, as Cowan (2012, p252) observes, “it has become increasingly clear to historians and social theorists that the places where consumption took place, or where consumer desires were stimulated, and the social milieux in which consumers were located are just as important to understand as the actual acts of consumption”. Riello’s (2006) analysis of the retailing and consumption of footwear in the eighteenth century is perhaps characteristic of this approach. Exploring the theme of consumers’ attitudes and behaviours, and related arguments on the existence of a marketing concept in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, he suggests: “[t]he history of retailing is no longer the historical analysis of practices, shops, or products. It appears, instead, as the historical investigation of the rationality and strategic actions that influenced consumers, producers, and retailers” (Riello, 2006, pp91, 92). His study illustrates how the retailing of footwear began to be transformed long before its mechanised mass production, with the emergence in London from the mid-1730s of new ‘shoe warehouses’ selling to consumers. The latter traded alongside more traditional outlets that retained the link between production and distribution and still dominated the marketplace, adapting to meet the challenge of the increased competition (Riello, 2006). The early decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a marked rise in the number of shoe shops, and at the top end of the market craft skills and knowledge were used to establish retailer identity in the market, part of what Riello terms “the invention of tradition” (p103).

Turning to the grocery trade, Stobart’s (2013) study Sugar and Spice seeks to provide an integrated analysis of the grocery trade in England, from merchant to consumer via retailer, in the period from the middle of the seventeenth to the early nineteenth century. He shows how the increased trade in imported goods like sugar, tobacco, tea and coffee had a significant effect in strengthening the retail sector. Stobart argues that the growth in the trade of these goods provided an important complement to grocers’ established stock, although it did not necessitate or bring about a
fundamental transformation of the sector as has previously been suggested (Stobart, 2013, p64).

Again we see debates on notions of continuity and change, with new retailing practices underpinned by established virtues of trust, service, reputation and respectability (Stobart, 2013).

Some studies of the early modern period seek to explain the significance of the changes in the retail sector that they identify to our understanding of the longer-term development of the retail industry. For example, Stobart and Hann (2004) argue that the eighteenth century acts as a bridge between the traditional and the modern in retailing. Mitchell (2014), studying a range of retailing types, including itinerant, fixed shop and market trading, argues that the evolution of retailing was more fragmented and fractured in the century and a half before 1850 than some of the literature suggests. Identifying what he considers to be evidence of some radical changes in retailing in the decades after the 1820s, he suggests that the middle decades of the nineteenth century should be reinstated as a key watershed in the history of retailing: “This is not because earlier retailing was in any way primitive”, but it was “essentially structured to meet the needs of a commercial rather than an industrial society” (p11). Mitchell (2014) adopts some of the language of retail innovation and change that is perhaps more commonplace among studies of more recent periods of retail history, an approach which offers at least the potential for more truly comparative analyses.

The development of British retailing since 1850

Large-scale and small-scale retailing

As has been widely commented upon, Jefferys’s (1954) Retail Trading in Britain 1850-1950 has had a significant impact upon the subsequent study of the history of retailing, and helps to explain much of the focus on large-scale institutional types such as the multiple, co-operative and department store retailer.
Historical analysis of each of these has enjoyed something of an uplift since the mid-1990s, again stimulated in part by the greater interest in the subject of consumption. The department store, like the co-operative movement discussed below, has been subject to particularly wide-ranging thematic attention. As Crossick and Jaumain (1999, p35) observe, in many ways the department store represents a means to explore cultural and social, as well as economic, change in Europe, noting that at times one may feel that one “is learning more about the place of the department store in contemporary discourse than about what went on in the department store itself”. The breadth of approaches can be seen, for example, by contrasting Lancaster’s (1995) historical survey of the British department store, with its focus on the business and social history of this type of retail institution, with Rappaport’s (2000) study of the place of the department store in the creation of Victorian London’s West End as a shopping centre that involved a “reinterpretation of public life, the economy and consumption, and class and gender ideology” (Rappaport, 2000, p7).

Recent work by Scott and Walker (2012) provides new perspectives on what went on in the inter-war department store with regard to issues of retail management. In a comparative analysis of US and British department stores, they utilise contemporary survey data to reveal how British retailers were quick to embrace the ‘retail managerial revolution’ and enjoyed high returns on their investments to improve management systems and processes. In a related study they examine the importance of advertising and promotion to the prosperity of many British department store retailers seeking to establish their store brands in the minds of consumers in a bid to stave off increased domestic competition from the multiples (Scott and Walker, 2010). Advertising spend, they argue, was most significant among those department stores located in the centre of larger towns and cities and reliant on drawing trade from an extensive catchment area, whilst the promotional activities of suburban stores and those in market towns were more focussed upon display and hence were more like those of their multiple retailer competitors (Scott and Walker, 2010, p1125).
Multiple retailers, defined by Jefferys (1954) as firms, other than department stores and co-operative societies, with 10 or more retail establishments, have also been subject to more recent historical analyses, including economic-historical and more cultural interpretations (Morelli, 1998; Winship, 2000). Some studies prioritise a geographical perspective, building upon earlier work which sought to identify the effects of new retail institutional types like the multiples on the changing patterns of retailing in the Victorian city (see, for example, Shaw and Wild, 1979). For example, Alexander et al. (2003) used sector and firm-level data to illustrate regional variations in the development of multiple retailing in England in the grocery and provisions and variety store trades, in the period between 1890 and 1939. They conclude that marked regional variations existed in the development of the store estates of multiples in these trades, with consequent spatial variations in both the economic and social impacts resulting from this transformation of retailing. A related study (Alexander et al., 1999) focuses on evidence from the inter-war period to further understanding of the disruptive competition of the multiples in various retail trades, and of its impacts on independent retailers in particular. It explores the notion of competition in three inter-related dimensions: locational competition, the enlargement and improvement of store space, and the use of advertising and promotion to establish the store brand in consumers’ perception or ‘mind-space’. Subsequent research has explored aspects of the use of multiple retailing techniques by firms selling a range of consumer goods and services, including its use by public houses (Mutch, 2006), and chain cafés and restaurants (Shaw et al., 2006). It also focuses on the effects on shopping of multiple retailers’ marketing practices, an example of such research being Walsh’s assessment of the activities of F.W. Woolworth in Northern Ireland and the Irish Republic (Walsh, 2014).

Turning to co-operative retailing, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, established in 1844 in the northern English mill town of Rochdale in Lancashire, provided a blueprint for subsequent consumer co-operative societies (see Wilson et al., 2013). The co-operative business model remained distinct from that of its competitors, representing a member-owned model based upon voluntary and democratic notions. Allied to this is its structure of local and regional societies with independent
identities, supported by central co-operative bodies. In part this helps to explain the commercial opportunities for the movement, but also some of the challenges that it has encountered in much of its more recent history. The tensions between local societies and central bodies, and between the central bodies themselves, have on occasion proved an impediment to change. Just how much of an impediment is made clear in Wilson et al.’s (2013) substantial new business history of the Co-operative Group, published to mark its 150th anniversary. Their analysis shows how tensions and rivalries served to derail several major initiatives designed to adapt and reform co-operative commercial activities in the face of growing competition (see also Black, 2009, on the Cooperative Independent Commission). In the final chapters of their study, Wilson et al. (2013) consider evidence of what has subsequently transpired to be a rather short-lived renaissance in the commercial fortunes of the group after 1997. By way of explanation, they point towards revitalised leadership, an aggressive strategy to merge previously separate and often underperforming parts of the business, new organisational initiatives in the retail supply chain and elsewhere, and new marketing activities based on notions of ethical trading. More generally, co-operative principles mean that the movement has been the focus of attention for historical research into the interconnections between retailing practices and matters of consumer protection (for example, Robertson, 2009), and of wider debates in consumerism.

Co-operative societies’ share of the retail market is estimated to have reached as much as 7% by 1900, and to have risen to 9% by 1920 (Jefferys, 1954). Yet national market share figures mask clear regional variations. As Purvis (1999) revealed in his historical-geographical analysis of co-operative development, early success in growing membership in industrial and mining centres, and some smaller and medium-sized urban centres, contrasted with the situation in larger cities like Manchester and Birmingham. Only by the 1920s did the movement become more firmly established in London, thanks to a process of amalgamation that spawned a few larger societies (Purvis, 1999). By 1950 the co-operative accounted for as much as 12% of total retail sales (Jefferys, 1954), but its zenith would soon pass; its market share had fallen back to 10.8% by 1961 (Wilson et al., 2013) and
several decades of decline were to follow, with market share declining to 4% by 1994 (Walton, 2009). Membership also suffered a general decline from the late 1960s. In a recent volume of essays on the co-operative movement, Walton argues that the resulting spate of society amalgamations, their new strategies of retail development including large out-of-centre superstores, together with the abandonment of the dividend, damaged co-operative societies’ identity and broke the often hard-earned link between societies and the localities that had spawned them (Walton, 2009, pp23, 24).

The movement suffered a decline in market share in both food retailing and non-food trades, despite being at the forefront of radical innovations including self-service grocery retailing in the immediate post-war years (Alexander, 2008; Shaw and Alexander, 2008). With regard to the non-food trades, Gurney (2012) highlights the challenges that a growing mass consumer culture in inter-war Britain posed to the co-operative movement. He observes that, in categories such as furniture and furnishings, radios, gramophones and vacuum cleaners, categories that he sees as being at the vanguard of the new consumer culture of inter-war Britain, co-operative retailing performed with ominous weakness compared to its department store and multiple retailer rivals (Gurney, 2012, p912). In part, this reflected business and commercial weaknesses, which persisted despite some progressive attempts to improve the design and hence desirability of its durable goods, and to enhance the salesmanship connected to them (Whitworth, 2009). As Gurney (2005, p963) argues, the post-war co-operative movement also endured deep divisions among activists concerning the economy and the culture of co-operation which would impact upon its ability to recruit new consumers.

In contrast to the renewed interest in the study of the department store, multiples and co-operatives, the historical development of British mail order retailing received little in the way of new and detailed attention from academics before the work of Coopey, O’Connell and Porter (see Coopey et al., 2005). They illustrate how mail order retailers operated largely on the basis of credit
provision, and how they were organised through a system of often spare-time neighbourhood-based agents, at least until enhanced computerisation led to the ‘depersonalisation’ of this form of selling. Consequently, they argue that “retailers in this sector were not driven solely by the logic of scale and scope but by the need to mould their operations onto the contours of working class life” (Coopey et al., 2005, p232). They characterise the period between 1950 and 1980 as the heyday of traditional mail order retailing, offering an increasing array of consumer goods to the sections of the working class that were enjoying greater affluence following the post-war austerity. The percentage of total UK retail sales by value accounted for by mail order retailing is estimated to have risen from less than 1% in 1950 to 5.3% (and 9.2% of total non-food retail sales) by 1979 (Coopey et al., 2005).

Turning to more recent times, Coopey (2012) suggests that the rise of internet retailing has left the mail order companies struggling to adapt, although rationalisation through mergers and mail order firms’ own online strategies have led to some signs of reinvigoration.

Despite the growth of large-scale retailing organisations described above, smaller-scale retailing, whether from fixed shops or otherwise, remained a significant component of the retail landscape after 1850 and accounted for about two-thirds of total retail sales in 1939 (Jefferys, 1954). Independent fixed-shop retailing was itself a very varied activity, encompassing the many ‘small shops’ as well as the more substantial, high-end outlets in urban centres, and also the village shop – a retail form that has received much-needed consideration of late (see Bailey, 2015). As Winstanley (1983) observes, modification and adaptation meant that the survival of the private shopkeeper might well have surprised Edwardian commentators. Such adaptations reflected concerns over the mass of small ‘family shops’ serving the growing if irregular working class market, as well those over large-scale retail institutions such as the multiples, co-operatives and department stores (Winstanley, 1983; Hosgood, 1989).

Itinerant trading also remained an important part of the retailing mix, with data suggesting an increase in the number of traders per capita over the second half of the nineteenth century (see
Benson and Ugolini, 2010). Similarly, markets were still significant in the retailing of food, and they represented an integral feature of many rapidly growing industrial centres, providing a wider range of typically low-cost commodities than is often recognised (Hodson, 1998). Exchange beyond the shop, though, was more diverse than this and could extend beyond the retail sector itself, as illustrated by contributions to a special issue of the *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* in 2010. Richmond (2010) explores the development of the church jumble sale, noting how they were quickly integrated into the budgeting strategies of some poorer consumers. Charitable enterprises of this sort represented one less formal channel for sale and exchange; another quite different one existed for the illicit trading of goods (Toplis, 2010).

Changing relations and the altering balance of power between different types of retailers, and between them and other members of the supply chain, can be identified throughout the period, in debates over the politics of shopkeeping. Retailer associations emerged in a bid to protect the perceived interests of differing classes of retailer from the effects of horizontal competition (see, for example, Hosgood, 1992), and there were occasional attempts to pass legislation. Analysis of the case of the failed Balfour Bill of 1937, a bill that was intended to limit the effects on independent retailers of competition from heavily capitalised large-scale retail businesses in inter-war Britain, reveals how fracturing among the ranks of the independent retailers could often weaken their position. Consequently the state saw no significant movement in favour of regulation (Shaw *et al.*, 2000).

The situation was rather different in relation to vertical competition between the retailer and the manufacturers. Debates surrounding the effects of Resale Price Maintenance (RPM), which extended across a widening array of goods in the first part of the twentieth century, and of its abolition in 1964, provide a critical insight into the changing relationships between suppliers, wholesalers and retailers. Mercer (2014), for example, provides a new and detailed evaluation of its impact across a range of retail trades in the middle years of the twentieth century. She argues that the operation of
individual RPM in the period between 1956 and 1964 in itself did not subdue competition in the retail trades to the extent that was sometimes claimed. Its abolition intensified earlier trends:

“Multiples could promote their own brands, brands that marginalized minor manufacturer brands, and squeezed all suppliers through manipulating brands and through pressure for buyer discounts, a process accentuated by physical expansion” (Mercer, 2014, p159). Bailey (2011) explores debates on retailer power and RPM in his case-study of the relationships between confectionery goods manufacturer Cadbury and its retailer and wholesaler clients in the period leading up to and immediately following the abolition of RPM. He reveals how the balance of power in the confectionery supply chain shifted to the multiples and particularly to supermarket retailers during the 1960s, identifying this as a process that was already underway before RPM’s abolition. Wholesalers and smaller independent retailers consequently found themselves in a less favourable position.

**A focus on a widening range of retailers and their supply chains**

Recent scholarship on the history of retailing illustrates an increasing concern with understanding the development of retailing across a breadth of retail trades. This section begins with an assessment of some of the latest research on two of the main consumer goods groups, food and clothing, which are estimated to have accounted for more than 58% and 19% of total retail sales respectively by 1900, and which still combined to account for 59% of total retail sales some fifty years later – the difference being the result of a fall in the share of food as a proportion of total retail sales (Jefferys, 1954). This section then turns to examining studies that contribute to our understanding of the history of retailing in a number of other commodity groups, reflecting a trend in a literature that now encompasses sectors as varied as the retailing of medicines (Anderson, 2006) and that of domestic furnishings (Edwards, 2005). The discussion not only highlights the diversity of retail activity in the modern period, but also underpins the preceding discussion by revealing how
differing types of businesses have competed and occasionally collaborated in order to win a share of changing consumer markets.

**Food and clothing**

That the grocery trade remains an important focus of attention in studies of retail history is understandable given both the scale of the market, and that of some of the leading firms within the trade. Analyses of the grocery trade highlight varying aspects of the structural change in the market, particularly the growth in importance of the multiple retailers. Some of this has taken on a geographical dimension, as in the aforementioned studies of multiple retailing in which the grocery trades represent a significant focus. Economic historians have also explored this structural change. Morelli (1998), for example, has sought to qualify a perspective that ties the increasingly oligopolistic market conditions of 1970s Britain, in which a small number of multiples enjoyed a rapid growth in their share of food sales, to the incremental evolutionary development of the firms themselves. He points to the years between 1958 and 1964 as being of fundamental importance as the grocery multiples sought to redefine their competitive environment against the backdrop of complex changes in the market, including the breakdown of RPM in food retailing, and conflicts over the changing balance of price and non-price competition (Morelli, 1998).

More recently there has also been a focus within the academic literature on detailing the development of critical innovations within the grocery trade, with particular attention having been given to the development of self-service retailing and the related supermarket format trading in the post-war decades (for example, Bowlby, 2000; Shaw et al., 2004). Studies consider issues of management and decision-making control in the operating of such formats (Alexander, 2015) and explore consumers’ reactions to the changing retail landscape (Usherwood, 2000; Alexander et al., 2008; Bailey et al., 2010), including some deleterious outcomes for retailers, such as shoplifting (Nell et al., 2011). The significance of these innovations can also be identified in developments in the wider retail grocery supply chain that reflect a changing balance of power between retailers and
their suppliers in favour of the former. Godley and Williams (2009), for example, reveal how Sainsbury’s sought to instigate and control collaborative relationships in the British poultry industry during the 1950s and 1960s, becoming a driving force behind the transformation of intensive rearing methods and of factory processing of poultry in Britain. They argue that this influence was vital to Sainsbury’s as it enabled them to control the standardisation of poultry products that was necessary as the firm transformed its retail estate from counter to self-service stores. More widely, they suggest that the learning derived from this experience of extending their influence along the supply chain would be an important element underpinning the firm’s success during the 1980s (Godley and Williams, 2009). The growing power of retailers in the supply chain can also be seen in relation to the often overlooked wholesaling sector, and the work of Quinn and Sparks (2007) provides much-needed insight into the historical development of that sector through an international comparison of the situation in Britain and Ireland from the 1930s onwards.

Retailing in the clothing trades has also remained a significant focus of study, both in terms of recent business histories (for example, Worth, 2007, on Marks and Spencer), and wider analyses of trends in retailing and consumption, including those of the menswear (Ugolini, 2007) and childrenswear trades (Rose, 2010). Ugolini’s (2007) analysis of menswear retailers, and particularly independent tailors, in the period 1880-1939 provides insight into the strategies and tactics they adopted as they sought to cope with the challenges of rapidly changing market conditions brought about both by wartime conditions, and by increasing competition between different types of menswear retailers during the inter-war decades. In particular she explores the effect of the rise of the multiple concerns, and the impacts on the independents of very successful businesses like Burtons, which focused on the sale of made-to-measure factory-produced suits. Ugolini also examines the image of the retailers in the eyes of their patrons, trade press commentators and other interested observers, and explores how some portrayed the practices of the independent bespoke tailor as anachronistic in comparison to those of the multiples. The trade press stressed the importance of menswear retailers adopting modern practices of advertising, window display and other merchandising, and
salesmanship, and of highlighting the individuality of their store and the personal service offered (Ugolini, 2007). However, as Ugolini observes, the larger multiples with their financial muscle were themselves prioritising improvements in shop display, advertising and salesmanship among other practices.

Honeyman’s (2000) analysis of the Leeds clothing industry provides further insight into the growth of many of these larger multiples, the city’s vertically integrated firms being responsible for the manufacture and retailing of over 60% of all suits sold in Britain for several decades from the 1930s onwards. She also charts the challenges they faced in post-war Britain, with its markedly changed demand for men’s fashion, arguing that these same firms were typically too reluctant to switch away from manufacturing and instead concentrate more on retailing, despite clear market signals that they should do so. Multiple retailers were also to play a more significant role in the distribution of women’s and girl’s clothing during the inter-war period and thereafter. In the hosiery and knitwear segment of the trade, in which the influence of multiple retailing practices became more quickly established, some manufacturers vertically integrated into retailing and others established what would evolve into large-scale and long-term contracts for sales direct to retail, such as that, for example, between Corah & Son of Leicester and Marks and Spencer (Chapman, 2002).

**Consumer durables and other household goods**

The growth in consumption of a widening range of consumer durables towards the end of the nineteenth century, and particularly during the first half of the twentieth century, and the stimulus that this provided to the retailing of such goods, has been the subject of another body of research that contributes to our understanding. Godley’s (2006) analysis of the British retailing operation of the US firm Singer in the period 1850-1920 explores the development of a direct sales operation to target the family market, with canvassers working out of retail stores and operating door to door, demonstrating the sewing machines and collecting orders and weekly payments in people’s homes. Subsequently the roles of canvasser and collector were separated to enable a check to be placed on
the quality of accounts being opened. Godley shows how the success of the system was reflected both in a tripling of UK sales between 1875 and 1884, and the rapid expansion of the supporting network of retail outlets, which numbered some 303 by 1885. A further revised canvasser-collector system was introduced during the 1880s in order to better control costs, with branch managers supervising the transactions (Godley, 2006).

Scott (2008) reveals a generally similar approach to the retailing of electric vacuum cleaners in the 1930s – part of his wider project to explore the retailing and consumption of consumer goods in early twentieth century Britain. He explores methods for the recruitment, training, management and daily activities of door-to-door salesmen in US manufacturer Hoover’s British operation, which by 1939 was claimed to represent the UK’s largest salaried outside sales force. Hoover developed relationships with established retailers, including major department store retailers such as Selfridges and Harrods. This enabled the promotion of the Hoover product, reduced the firm’s distribution costs, and passed the management of hire purchase (HP) agreements on to these retailers (Scott, 2008). Yet Scott argues that, ultimately, the firm’s sales management failed to develop an incentive system to reconcile the twin objectives of motivating salesmen to maximise sales whilst limiting any damaging opportunistic behaviour, leading to consumer resistance and, he suggests, resulting in long-term damage to the image of door-to-door selling in the minds of many consumers (Scott, 2008, p787).

Furniture represented a highly prioritised consumer good for working-class and lower-middle-class consumers alike during the inter-war years, and the extension of the market within lower-income groups saw the rapid growth of the sector (Scott, 2009). Department stores, and particularly the new multiple operations, which catered more to the demand from the growing working-class market, were significant players in the market, with the co-operative becoming more involved in the retailing of furniture from the 1930s (Edwards, 2005). Scott (2009) analyses the innovative marketing formula of multiples in that part of the trade that was typically reliant upon offering HP agreements to
working-class customers, and the national advertising campaigns seeking to legitimise the use of HP for buying furniture and showcasing the lifestyle benefits of such purchases. He concludes, “...the HP furniture multiples enabled many households to realize a higher standard of material comfort and display, if at a substantial cost...” (Scott, 2009, p826).

The importance of symbolic meaning and consumer lifestyle aspirations are also identified in Carnevali and Newton’s (2013) study of a less widely diffused good, the piano. They argue that improvements in production, and increased competition among both manufacturers and specialised musical instrument retailers, resulted in greater choice and lower prices in the retail market, at least from the 1860s onwards. From the 1890s, department store retailers such as Harrods, Whiteleys, and later Selfridges, began to transform the retailing of both new and second-hand pianos, being joined subsequently by the Co-operative Wholesale Society (Carnevali and Newton, 2013). Carnevali and Newton illustrate how manufacturers and retailers alike used the symbolic meaning of the piano to promote the product, and sought to use notions of brand value in an attempt to tap into many middle-class consumers’ concerns over social status.

**Retailing and the creative industries**

Studies of the retailing of the products and services of the creative industries, as well as the impact of industries such as advertising (see Beard, chapter 11) and product and packaging design (Whitworth, 2009; Trunk, 2011) on the retail sector itself, represent important areas of more recent exploration within the stream of historical analysis. As Friedman and Jones (2011) observe, these industries are not represented in the business history literature to the extent that their importance warrants. Two examples of recent work are considered here, related to the couture and music entertainment industries, which are illustrative of a wider concern with understanding the relationships between the creative industries and the retail sector.

Whilst much of the interest in the history of fashion surrounds its cultural meaning, recent work also reveals the potential to explore the clothing fashion industry from a business and economic history
perspective, despite the challenges involved in studying empirically a trade that has evidently left behind comparatively few documentary sources (Giertz-Mårtenson, 2012). This body of work includes a 2012 special issue of *Business History*, the editors of which stress that “the fashion business depends on more than the creative genius of a designer-couturier. It instead draws sustenance from a complex institutional network...” (Polese and Blaszczyk, 2012, p8). Font’s (2012) study of international couture in the period 1880-1920 highlights the connectivity in the network between designers and retailers. She explores the business activities of Parisian couture houses, which at the time were establishing international branches and courting alliances with British and American department store retailers.

Turning to the retailing of a quite different output of the creative industries, Tennent’s (2013) analysis of the changing distribution of music between 1950 and 1976 reveals how the big four UK-based record manufacturers, EMI, Decca, Pye and Phillips, each developed their wholesale distribution activities in the later 1950s and 1960s. In this way, he argues, they enhanced their control of the supply chain through exclusive distribution and the imposition of stricter ordering terms for retailers as the threat of the abolition of RPM in the trade increased. The retail sector they supplied was itself changing, with specialist record stores becoming more important throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the selling of records having previously been frequently undertaken through electrical shops (Tennent, 2013). Tennent explains how, in the later 1960s, firms like Pye and EMI integrated further into retailing, first by acquiring record shops, which in the case of EMI would lead to the establishment of the nationwide chain of HMV outlets, and then by overseeing the display and stocking of full-price records in supermarkets and stores such as Woolworths.

**The internationalisation of retailing**

Even a cursory reflection on the discussion in the preceding sections reveals that the historical development of retailing in Britain, at least since the last decades of the nineteenth century, has
taken place within a context of the growing internationalisation of retailing. Such internationalisation encompasses both foreign direct investment such as that by Hoover and Woolworth, and also the transfer and adaptation of innovations observed in other retail markets, such as, for example, the principles of self-service retailing and supermarket format trading from North America (de Grazia, 2005). Consequently, it is important to consider the character, extent, influences and directions of such internationalisation, and also how the literature on the internationalisation of retailing illustrates attempts to develop theoretical debate within the subject of retail history.

In relation to the British market, Fletcher and Godley’s (2000) study of foreign direct investment (FDI) in retailing during the period 1850-1962 reveals that it grew through the twentieth century. They identify that this investment occurred in three broad waves that each display some temporal concentration, comprising firstly luxury retail FDI, particularly before 1900, then consumer durables particularly in the latter decades of the nineteenth and first decades of the twentieth centuries, and thirdly consumer non-durables, which represented a more significant component of activity in the subsequent decades. Importantly, their analysis of the firms investing in British retailing reveals that early waves of FDI were dominated not by retailers, as has typically been the case in more recent phases of the internationalisation of the retailing industry of course, but more so by foreign manufacturers (Fletcher and Godley, 2000; Godley, 2003). As discussed above, this provided opportunities for existing retailers to work with these incoming firms, such as was the case for the department stores in the durable consumer goods trades. Fletcher and Godley argue that, with the exception of a half-dozen firms, it was not until the 1950s that foreign investment was undertaken by a large number of firms that can be identified as being principally retailers (Fletcher and Godley, 2000, p58).

Similarly, British firms were involved in overseas retailing ventures, as described by Alexander (2011) in his assessment of the characteristics of such activities during the first half of the twentieth
century. Again what is notable is the overseas investment in retailing by businesses whose primary focus often lay beyond the retail sector. Such businesses included trading companies like Booker Brothers, McConnell and Company and the United Africa Company which were principally engaged in trading in primary products in colonial markets (Alexander, 2011 p535; Godley and Hang, 2012). The activities of such trading companies, and their responses to the changes leading up to and following decolonisation, have been the focus of research highlighting the need to understand the rich interconnection between the economic, cultural and political spheres if we are to fully comprehend the evolution of the retailing enterprises that these companies established (for example, Decker, 2007; Murillo, 2011).

The importance of analyses of the historical development of international retailing lies not only in their empirical contribution to our understanding of the extent and characteristics of firms’ activities, but also in the fact that they highlight the need for, and potential of, theoretical debate to enhance our understanding of the processes at hand. Attempts to situate and explain the phenomena of internationalisation in relation to theoretical propositions, typically drawn from business management, has led to useful debate (see, for example, Godley and Hang, 2012; Alexander, 2013) and prompted new empirical case-study research in the search for verification (see for example, Doherty and Alexander, 2014).

**Conclusion**

The history of British retailing represents a vibrant research area, and one that has received a significant stimulus over the last twenty years from the surge in interest in matters related to consumption across many disciplinary areas. Arguably, the impact of this has been felt most strongly in relation to studies of retailing in the period before 1850, with the consequence that we now have far more insight into earlier retailing systems than was hitherto the case. Other recent research offers much-needed insight into the retailing of a wider range of consumer durable goods and the
outputs of the creative industries. The retailing of such goods has previously been comparatively overlooked, despite their social and economic significance. Alongside this, the increased attention given to the changing relationships between retailers, manufacturers and wholesalers informs our understanding of retailers’ increasing importance in the supply chain.

The wide range of disciplines contributing to our understanding of British retail history suggests that there will continue to be a diversity of both approaches applied and emerging research topics. From my own disciplinary perspective, I suggest four topic areas that are perhaps particularly worthy of further attention. First, whilst there have been welcome contributions more recently exploring the wider supply chain, there clearly remains scope for further enquiry into historical trends and their implications for the retail sector. One example of a topic for study in this context concerns the new organisational forms such as wholesaler voluntary groups and retailer buying groups that emerged in the grocery trade in the later 1950s. Second, more recently the issue of retail work has begun to attract more of the attention that it deserves (see, for example, the programme of the Annual CHORD Conference, 2014). Structural changes to the retail sector and the evolving commercial strategies of retail organisations such as those discussed in this chapter have had significant implications for the nature of retail work. Consequently, there is an opportunity to more fully synthesise contemporary debates on the evolving nature of retail work (see, for example, Bozkurt and Grugulis, 2011) with historical analyses of change in the sector (Alexander, 2015; Purvis, 2015). The third topic area particularly worthy of further study, the impact of developments in information technology on retailing practices, is more wide-ranging in scope, with its potential to fundamentally alter both the nature of retail work, and retailers’ supply chain relations, both downstream with wholesalers and producers and upstream with consumers, including through internet retailing (Cortada, 2003). Finally, although some areas of research advance theoretical arguments in their contribution to retail history, perhaps most notably that concerned with the history of the internationalisation of retailing, there remains a clear need, and indeed considerable opportunity, for more such theoretically informed debate.
Note

1. Most of the material considered in this chapter relates to the retail history of Great Britain, but some sources consider retailing in the UK.

References


Black, L. (2009), “‘Trying to sell a parcel of politics with a parcel of groceries’: the Co-operative Independent Commission (CIC) and consumerism in post-war Britain”, in Black, L. and Robertson, N. (Eds.), Consumerism and the Co-operative movement in Modern British History. Taking Stock, Manchester University Press, Manchester, pp. 33-50.


Cox, P. and Hobley, A. (2014), Shopgirls: The True Story of Life behind the Counter, Hutchinson, London.


