LEICESTER AND THE GROWTH OF
FOOTWEAR DISTRIBUTION,
1850–1914

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This is the second of two papers reviewing development of the boot and shoe industry. Growth of distribution is set within the context of social and economic changes that were brought about by rapid industrialisation. Leicester firms played a key role in developing new methods of distribution, notably the rise of multiple retail companies. The combination of dynamic manufacturing and distribution firms was instrumental in improving the town’s fortunes during the second half of the nineteenth century.

INTRODUCTION

Britain in 1850 was undergoing great social change. The industrial revolution was creating large urban centres that were to expand further during the next half-century, as migration from the countryside drew men and women in search of a better life. Expansion of the railway network permitted the rapid transport of people, raw materials and finished goods. As towns expanded, the inadequacy of social structures became more apparent, which gradually led to the introduction of legislation that would see enormous improvements in living conditions by the end of the century. On the face of it, none of this would have any obvious effect on boot and shoe manufacture in Leicester, but, as we shall see, Leicester firms recognised that new methods of retailing were necessary in order to satisfy industrial and social change.

My previous paper reviewed the origins and growth of shoemaking from the manufacturing perspective.1 It showed how local people readily adopted changes in the methods of production that mechanisation brought about. This allowed an industry to develop during the second half of the nineteenth century that made Leicester the foremost shoemaking centre in the country and the largest source of employment in the town. Formerly one of the poorest towns in the country, it was transformed into one of the most prosperous. However, transformation was not solely the result of actions taken by manufacturers; many other factors played a part in the development. In this paper, I will discuss the development of retailing and show how it played a key role in the industry’s development. To understand how this came to pass, it is necessary to discuss the changes that were taking place in society. To start with, I will consider the development of the mass market and its relationship to an increasing population. I will then show how a group of

1 TLAHS, 83 (2009), pp. 175–218.
entrepreneurs in Leicester changed the face of footwear retailing and, by so doing, ensured manufacturers developed rather faster than would otherwise have been the case.

ACCEPTANCE OF READY-MADE FOOTWEAR AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE MASS MARKET

Many unconnected factors helped to ensure that ready-made boots and shoes came to replace their hand-made equivalent. Shoemakers in London’s West End had adopted the concept of holding ready-made or ‘sale’ boots and shoes in their shops from the middle of the eighteenth century. This provided a means of disposing of boots that, for whatever reason, had not been sold. It also provided some modicum of continuous employment to the journeyman shoemaker in slack times. It was, therefore, only a logical next step to deliberately buy and hold goods in stock for subsequent resale. As early as 1764 a price list in the Boot and Slipper Inn at Northampton displayed ready-made and bespoke prices for a range of men’s and ladies’ boots and shoes, the ready-made products being 10–20 per cent less than the bespoke equivalent. In 1792, boot manufacturers in the small market town of Chesham in Buckinghamshire, a day’s ride from London, regularly sold 1,000 pairs of ready-made boots a week to London buyers. In the north, Nantwich shoemakers travelled weekly during the 1820s to sell their goods at the Manchester Bazaar, which was the forerunner of the department store, Kendal Milne, which opened in 1831. Being cheaper than the hand-made product, ready-made boots could be purchased by a wider range of customers. These changes led to the development of specialist shoe shops as the producer/retailer gradually ceased manufacturing in favour of selling the finished product. The number of independent shoe retailers increased rapidly after 1850 to meet the needs of an increasingly urban population.

Increased demand before the arrival of machines was satisfied with no technical change to the means of production. All changes were made only to distribution and sales systems. For example, in 1812, William Hickson started a wholesale operation in London to distribute boots and shoes made by some Northampton producers to independent retailers. In Leicester, Nathaniel Corah had started to buy shoes, as well as hose and other knitwear items, before 1820 for sale on Birmingham market. The ready-made market developed slowly but surely throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and served as the basis from which the mass market developed.

Acceptance of ready-made products gradually led to the introduction of new methods of retailing boots and shoes. As demand increased, the market changed from a personal one, where customers bought a pair of shoes from the shoemaker...
who had made them, to a mass market serviced by large factories. Industrial towns, with their rapidly increasing populations, created demand for all types of products, including footwear. An opportunity arose for people, often but not necessarily shoemakers, to act as middlemen between producers and retailers. The boot and shoe wholesaler, or factor, filled this position and soon became an important part of the distribution chain; a few became distributors on a national basis, though most developed an expertise in the requirements of a region or local area. Factors sold their goods to a broad range of retail outlets in towns and villages, in particular independent retailers, but also drapery stores, village shops, grocers etc.

Growth of the mass market also helped to create other forms of footwear sales outlet, of which the multiple retail shop became the most important. Co-operative stores and department stores also became significant methods of retail distribution. The change came about as a result of increasing demand for reasonably priced goods from residents of industrial towns. However, none of the new forms of distribution could have progressed without an improvement to the way that goods could be distributed. In this they were helped by the railways, which could transport large or small quantities of goods quickly and cheaply throughout the country in a way that canals had not been able to achieve.

By the end of the century, local independent specialist shoe shops and multiple retailers came to be the main retail outlets. Early twentieth-century commercial directories show that every reasonably sized industrial and market town boasted several shoe shops. In any town, the range of boots and shoes looked similar, irrespective of which shop was visited. The resulting competition ensured that price played an important role in the success, or otherwise, of every retailer.

The mass market for ready-made goods expanded rapidly from the 1850s as the relative cost of a pair of boots started to fall. For example, a pair of work boots cost 47.1 per cent of an agricultural worker’s wage in 1850, but only 27.4 per cent in 1907. Mass market, large-scale retailers demanded more than just lower prices; standardisation, regular sizes, improved design and better quality were all necessary if customers’ rising expectations were to be satisfied. Manufacturers were therefore forced to improve the quality of their products by introducing the latest production techniques. Leicester firms were the first to rise to this new challenge.

Development of new methods of selling boots and shoes started in the 1840s and gathered pace during the rest of the century. By 1900, sales through co-operative societies, department stores and multiple retailers had completely changed the nature of retailing. J. B. Jeffreys calculated that these new forms of retail trading accounted for between 24.5 and 31 per cent of total sales in 1900, and between 41 and 47 per cent in 1915, of which multiples accounted for some 75 per cent. If we assume that independent retailers grew at the same rate and had broadly the same market share as multiples, it becomes apparent that the weekly

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markets, bespoke shoemakers and various other sundry retail outlets lost market share, and in 1915 accounted for between 22 and 24 per cent of the total. Percentages may not be accurate, but the general trend was for sales to be concentrated through independent retail shops, multiple retailers, co-operative and department stores, thus making it inevitable that sales through traditional methods would decline.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to verify Jeffreys’s calculations because the basis of his work is unknown. Moreover, the actual size of the market and the rate at which it grew is unknown. Such information as is available is often contradictory, thus making it difficult to draw any conclusions. The following paragraphs attempt to set some parameters for annual consumption.

Figure 1, based on the population census figures for Great Britain and Ireland, shows how theoretical consumption of footwear grew in the period up to 1911. It shows the extreme limits of annual consumption. For example, in 1911, consumption could have varied between c. 45 million pairs (one pair/person) and 135 million pairs (three pairs/person). If the rate was two pairs per person, annual consumption would have been from 54 million pairs in 1851, rising to c. 90 million pairs in 1911.

It is unlikely that increased consumption exactly mirrored the increase in population. When the standard of living increased and the cost of boots fell as a proportion of wages, customers had the option of buying better quality products or buying more pairs. Introduction of special footwear for new sports and pastimes during the 1880s undoubtedly increased consumption, but no information is available to enable us to judge what impact it had on the total market. If the annual rate of consumption throughout the period was three pairs per person, total consumption would have reached 100 million pairs by 1880, but this is a quantity that does not fit with most other estimates. At a later date when government collected statistics more regularly, it was calculated in 1931 that consumption of all types of shoe was only 2.5 pairs per person, so it is unlikely to have been three pairs in 1880.8

However, to illustrate how much estimates varied, one estimate in 1871 suggested consumption was in the region of one pair per person.9 Another estimate in 1877 calculated that annual consumption in Britain and Ireland had reached 156 million pairs, equivalent to 4.5 pairs per person.10 Somewhat later, Seebohm Rowntree recorded in 1900 that working-class people in York could survive on one pair of new or refurbished boots annually.11 He went on to say that, out of 30 per cent of the population who were considered poor, one-third were judged to be so poor that they could only buy boots if they did not buy food.12 If that calculation was extended to the whole country, total annual

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8 Shoe Manufacturers’ Monthly (Nov. 1931), p. 188.
10 Boot & Shoe Reporter, 20.9.1877, p. 8. It should be noted that the annual consumption rate in Great Britain did not reach four pairs per person until the 1960s.
12 Rowntree, Poverty, p. 31.
consumption in 1900 would have been less than 30 million pairs. Another survey, made in 1911, stated that 20 per cent of boys and 19 per cent of girls did not own a pair of boots. Unfortunately, the accuracy of this statement, as with others, cannot be verified. All of the above suggests that one should err on the side of caution when estimating pre-1914 consumption figures.

G. W. Rimmer estimated that annual consumption in the period 1900–05 averaged 92.5 million pairs. The Federation of Boot and Shoe Trade Associations calculated that consumption reached 100 million pairs in 1904. The National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives (NUBSO) thought that this total was not reached until 1911. If we assume that annual consumption in 1861 was between one and one and a half pairs, and reached two pairs per person by 1914, then, allowing for errors of 5 per cent either way, Table 1 indicates that annual consumption in 1914 was between 87.39 and 96.59 million pairs. Taking everything into consideration, it would seem that consumption is unlikely to have reached 100 million pairs before 1914.

URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Before considering how suppliers met the needs of the changing retail scene, we should take note of other factors that were to have an effect on retail development.

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13 *Boot & Shoe Retailer*, 27.9.1912.
Growth of the market was based on the rapid increase in population, rising incomes and improvements to the general standard of living. However, this basic explanation was supplemented by a number of changes to the environment that took place during the second half of the nineteenth century.

The architectural appearance of towns changed radically with the introduction of a number of new municipally-funded or approved projects, such as improved water supply systems, new town halls, sewage systems, paving of streets, gas lighting and improved housing for workers. All of the above brought about great improvements to the general standard of the urban environment compared to the first half of the century. Heavy boots were still required for most jobs, though increasing numbers of people worked in offices where boots were not necessary. The introduction of properly surfaced streets and pavements meant that lighter weight boots and shoes gradually became more suitable for certain occupations towards the end of the century. Cleaner streets and improved drainage reduced the need for heavy footwear, and so played an important, though indirect, role in the evolution of fashion. As a result, boots and shoes for both sexes gradually became lighter in weight between 1870 and 1914.

In 1850 ladies shoes were generally low-heeled, while men still wore knee-high Wellington boots. Thereafter, high-legged boots for men were replaced by boots of ankle height, a style that prevailed for the rest of the century. Introduction of elastic-sided ankle boots produced a better fitting, easy to wear boot, the popularity of which lasted for most of the second half of the century. The weight of boots gradually reduced to suit changing conditions. Elastic-sided boot were also popular with women. The heel height of women’s styles gradually increased during the period. The elastic-sided boot was superseded towards the end of the century by a buttoned ankle boot as the new women’s fashion.

Table 1. Projected annual consumption (million pairs) of Great Britain and Ireland.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>−5%</th>
<th>2 pairs/person</th>
<th>+5%</th>
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<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>55.23</td>
<td>58.14</td>
<td>61.05</td>
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<td>1871</td>
<td>60.10</td>
<td>63.26</td>
<td>66.43</td>
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<td>1881</td>
<td>66.55</td>
<td>70.05</td>
<td>73.55</td>
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<td>1891</td>
<td>71.97</td>
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<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>79.06</td>
<td>83.22</td>
<td>87.38</td>
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<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>86.20</td>
<td>90.74</td>
<td>95.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1914</td>
<td>87.39</td>
<td>91.99</td>
<td>96.59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Census of Population, 1861–1921. 1914 total is proportionate difference between 1911 and 1921 returns.

17 Boot & Shoe Retailer, 3.11.1911, p. 2.
Women’s fashion was given another boost after 1905 when hemlines were raised above the ankle and the foot became visible.\textsuperscript{18} Boots, that had been the predominant style throughout the nineteenth century, were replaced by shoes. This increased the fashion potential and allowed designers to produce many more styles. It also meant that different shoes were required to match a change of clothes.

Increasing individual wealth and greater amounts of free time provided the opportunity to spend money in different ways. Sports and pastimes that had been the preserve of the upper classes became available to a broader spectrum of society. Skating rinks were built in the 1870s to satisfy the craze of the time.\textsuperscript{19} As well as skating, pastimes such as cycling, rowing and ice-skating became popular throughout the country. Sports were more organised; cricket, football, rugby and tennis clubs were formed in the 1870s and 1880s. Leicestershire County Cricket Club was formed in 1879, while the Leicester Football Club (now known as Leicester Tigers) was formed the following year. Leicester City Football Club was formed in 1884 as Leicester Fosse. Many of the new sports and pastimes could not readily be undertaken in normal everyday dress, so special clothes were designed, which also created a demand for suitable footwear. This was a completely new sector that offered opportunities for both manufacturers and retailers. Firms specialising in the manufacture of boots and shoes for specific sports and pastimes were established from the 1880s.

One frequently unnoticed change came about as a result of the Education Act of 1870, the objective of which was to encourage education for all children between the ages of five and 13. Increasing school attendance after 1880 gradually created a demand for school shoes. Leicestershire firms became the major producers of boys’ and girls’ school shoes.

**TRANSPORT**

Improvements in methods of transport were to have a major effect on the distribution of footwear. Improved road transport as a result of turnpiking and the creation of a canal system played a part, but it would not have been possible to establish a network of retail shoe shops, covering the whole country, if railways had not developed so extensively.

4 July 1837 was a significant date in British railway history marking, as it did the opening of the first great trunk line – the Grand Junction Railway. From this date, through-passenger trains ran between the great Lancashire towns of Manchester and Liverpool to Birmingham. By September of the next year the London and Birmingham Railway, sister company of the Grand Junction, was opened, thus completing the chain between Lancashire and the Metropolis. The Midland Counties Railway, which served the towns of Derby, Nottingham and Leicester, opened in May 1840, making a connection with the London and


\textsuperscript{19} The Leicester skating rink was located on Rutland Street.
Birmingham Railway at Rugby and hence with London. The relevance of these developments to the commercial interests of the East Midlands was incalculable. By 1852 all major industrial centres were connected to the railway network, and hardly a town or village was more than a couple of miles from a railway station.

Railways offered four advantages over existing methods of transport, namely speed, regularity, cost and the ability to carry all sizes of package. This meant that, as the network grew, goods could be delivered to most towns within two or three days of despatch. Development of railway timetables, postal services and later the telegraph and telephone improved the certainty and regularity of communication, so that both suppliers and customers knew when goods would arrive at their destination.

Railways also enabled shops to order any quantity of boots or shoes, large or small. This was of enormous importance to retailers since it meant that they could order variable quantities on a weekly basis. In 1893 the majority of shoe factory despatches were between 150 and 400lb, equating to shipments between 75 and 200 pairs by the time they had been packed in a wicker hamper. 20

The first railway directly to benefit Leicester industry was the line to Rugby, enabling passengers to travel to London in 4½ hours with only one change. The most important line, however, for Leicester’s boot and shoe buyers was the Midland Railway that opened in 1857, passing through Kettering and Wellingborough, with an onward connection to London. A line to Northampton, via Market Harborough, was opened in 1859. Virtually all shoemaking towns and villages in Leicestershire and Northamptonshire were located relatively close to railway lines, which enabled wholesalers and multiple retail firms in Leicester to obtain regular supplies of all types of footwear.

WHOLESALE DISTRIBUTORS

Increasing demand from the country in general, but especially from the six major conurbations of Greater London, West Midlands, South-east Lancashire, West Yorkshire, Tyneside and Merseyside, was satisfied in a number of ways, the earliest of which was the wholesale distributor or factor. 21 Such firms usually traded on a local or regional basis, though a few became known nationally. They supplied a complete range of styles and sizes to local independent shoe shops, drapers and general stores. A factor supplemented the efforts of the shoe manufacturer’s salesman by visiting retail outlets more regularly than a manufacturer could hope to.

Wholesale distributors evolved from the early part of the nineteenth century, reflecting the growth of the ready-made market. The London borough of Hackney was traditionally the most important distribution centre, though substantial firms grew up in many other towns and cities. The two largest firms in London were J. Darnell & Son and F. Doughty & Sons. Leicester became an important

20 Shoe & Leather Record, 28.5.1881, p. 256.
distribution centre later in the century, as its proximity to sources of supply, its good transport connections and dynamic approach to business became more important. The growth of wholesale distributors enabled independent retailers to expand their range of shoes for sale.

T. C. & J. S. Lee, established in the 1790s, was the first wholesale distributor in Leicester, presumably dealing at first only in hosiery goods. Boots and shoes were added at some point, making it the only firm known to have distributed a full range of boots and shoes as well as an extensive range of hosiery.\(^{22}\) The firm was unusual in that it also established its own shoe factory during the 1870s. The manufacturing side did not survive more than a few years, presumably because the owners found it more profitable to buy from outside suppliers than spend time and effort managing a factory.

W. Rowles was another early wholesale distributor. In 1868, Mr Rowles was considered to be ‘one of our largest factors in this branch of the trade’.\(^{23}\)

James Lulham started as a wholesale distributor in Leicester in the early 1870s and remained so for the whole of its long existence. As a result of its single-minded

\(^{22}\) *Leicester Illustrated* (Leicester, 1891), p. 64.

\(^{23}\) Spencer’s *New guide to Leicester* (Leicester, 1867), pp. 112–13.
approach, the firm rapidly became one of the largest factors in the country. In 1901 they opened a secondary warehouse in Cardiff to satisfy demand in South Wales, which was their most important trading area.\(^{24}\) The scale of business can be gauged by their 1902 catalogue, which carried 1,000 different lines.

Firms sometimes moved to gain commercial advantage. For example, S. A. Squirrel, founded in Manchester in 1872, transferred its offices and warehouse to Leicester in 1896 in order to be nearer to the sources of production.\(^{25}\)

C. Skinner & Sons was one of the earliest shoe manufacturers in the town. In 1908 they ceased manufacturing in order to concentrate on wholesale distribution. The firm started to fail after the founder retired and eventually filed for bankruptcy in 1913. Nichols, Son & Clow was another of the early manufacturing companies that ceased production in favour of distribution.

Many small wholesale distributors started up between 1870 and 1914, but few survived long. The cost of financing stock that would not be sold for some months was often too great a burden for those without sufficient capital or the ability to arrange a bank loan.

**MULTIPLE RETAILERS**

It can be argued that a retailer becomes a multiple retailer as soon as he opens a second shop. Under this definition, multiple boot and shoe retailers probably existed in London from the Middle Ages. However, while accepting that some multiple retailers were already in existence, this paper is more concerned with the development of multiple retailing after 1850 and with larger firms that had a number of branches, spread nationally or regionally.

Multiple retailers opened shops in industrial towns to satisfy increasing demand. The photograph in Fig. 3, taken in 1862, shows that the Glasgow-based firm of R. & J. Dick, founded in 1846, was already established nationally, with branches in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Sheffield, London, Hull, Nottingham, Belfast, Glasgow, Dublin etc.

At its height, during the early 1870s, the firm had over 70 branches selling as many as 34,000 pairs of shoes weekly.\(^{26}\) R. & J. Dick was the first multiple to establish a genuinely national distribution network. Its importance cannot be over-emphasised, for it acted as a model that was copied by Leicester multiple retailers after 1870.\(^{27}\) However, it was not alone in having a branch network during the 1860s. Firms such as G. & W. Morton (Glasgow), Scales & Salter (Leeds), Upsons and Pocock & Sons (both London) and George Handyside (Newcastle) all had substantial local or regional networks before 1870.\(^{28}\) By 1870,

\(^{24}\) *BSTJ*, 30.6.1905, p. 549.
\(^{26}\) T. Chalmers, *100 Years of Guttapercha* (Glasgow, 1946), p. 23.
\(^{27}\) The company did not develop its shoe business after 1870, preferring to expand into other industries which were more profitable. The number of shops gradually declined, but production on a reducing scale continued until 1932.
there were 10 boot and shoe retail firms with more than 10 branches, a total of 175 branches. 29

A notable feature of R. & J. Dick’s method of trading was to mark shoes with a price tag, in their case 5s. per pair. 30 The principle of price marking was adopted by all multiple retailers. By marking prices, they indicated the competitive level of pricing and also avoided having to give discount.

Jeffreys considered that multiple retailers controlled 2,589 shops that accounted for between 18 and 22 per cent of total national footwear sales in 1900, a level that, by 1915, had increased to between 31 and 35 per cent. 31 The larger Leicester firms controlled about 1,200 branches and, together with a number of smaller firms, probably controlled between 1,300 and 1,400 branches. Whatever the actual number of branches may have been, the evidence clearly shows that multiple retailing increased rapidly after 1870 and Leicester firms dominated the

29 Jeffreys, Retail Trading, p. 356.
30 Chalmers, 100 Years of Guttapercha, p. 23.
31 Jeffreys, Retail Trading, p. 373.
market. This type of retailing developed earlier in footwear than in any other sector of the clothing industry. In 1906 it was said that there were three shoe shops to every one of any other in the wearing apparel line.\textsuperscript{32}

If we consider the origins and growth of some multiple retailers who became household names, we see that they did not follow a uniform path. Some firms ceased manufacturing when the business grew to a size that it became impossible for the owners to control both production and retail activities. Others, however, retained their production capacity because they felt it enabled them to supply a unique range of shoes to their own branches. No one firm could produce a complete range of the different types and styles of men’s, women’s and children’s shoes, so all had to buy in certain styles if they were to compete effectively. Some firms concentrated their effort in particular areas of the country, while others opened branches wherever they thought they could make a profit.

Though Stead & Simpson is considered to be a Leicester firm, the two founders originally started in 1834 in Leeds as curriers and leather dealers. By 1840 the business had flourished to such an extent that they decided to make boots and soon after opened a warehouse beside the factory, which was ‘patronised by the growing number of buyers of ready-made boots’.\textsuperscript{33} The main outlet was through their existing leather customers. In 1854 they opened a factory in Leicester.\textsuperscript{34} Throughout this period the emphasis was on production, with a warehouse/shop attached to the factories. Their first retail shops were opened during the early 1870s in Carlisle, Whitehaven, South Shields and Sunderland.\textsuperscript{35} The retail business developed rapidly so that, by 1889, they had about 100 branches. Sales were concentrated in the north to such an extent that, during the 1890s, they had eight branches in Glasgow but none in London.\textsuperscript{36} After 1860 the business quickly became centred on Leicester, where 60 per cent of the work force was employed. The headquarters was transferred to Leicester in 1889 when the firm was incorporated as a limited company.

W. & E. Turner were first listed as boot and shoe manufacturers in Wright’s \textit{Midland Directory} of 1864. In 1876, as well as a factory, they had a warehouse/shop in Leicester, a branch in Sheffield, and an agency in Glasgow where they held stock. In 1883 they had 20–30 branches.\textsuperscript{37} By 1900, more than 100 branches were spread throughout the country, but with a greater concentration in south Wales than elsewhere. The Directors’ minutes of this period show concern at the cost of production in the factory, noting that other companies had lower manufacturing costs. Costs were contained by producing only those styles that were most profitable until the factory was sold as a going concern in 1903.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{32} *The shoe shop* (1906), pp. 1–2.
\textsuperscript{33} Anon, \textit{Stead & Simpson Centenary 1834–1934} (Leicester, 1934), unpaginated.
\textsuperscript{34} Anon, *Stead & Simpson*, unpaginated.
\textsuperscript{35} Anon, *Stead & Simpson*, unpaginated.
\textsuperscript{36} Anon, *Stead & Simpson*
\textsuperscript{37} ROLLR, DE 2835/11, W. & E. Turner, Ledger notes.
\textsuperscript{38} ROLLR, DE 2835/1, W. & E. Turner, Directors’ Minutes (20 Feb. 1902).
John Tyler and his two brothers separately commenced manufacturing boots and shoes about 1860. Gradually they amalgamated their interests and became involved with retail. By 1891 they had about 100 branches throughout Britain and were especially strong in Ireland. By this time they also had a thriving shoe repair business.

Freeman, Hardy & Willis (see Fig. 4) was the largest multiple retailer in 1900, at which time it had over 300 branches spread throughout the country. The firm was started by Edward Wood, who commenced manufacturing boots and shoes in Leicester in 1872. In 1876 the company was incorporated and its name changed to Freeman, Hardy & Willis Ltd, which were the names of the accountant, factory manager and traveller respectively. Production ceased the following year in order to concentrate on the retail and wholesaling sides of the business. Wholesale distribution was soon discarded in favour of developing their retail interests. The business expanded partly by organic growth and partly by acquisition, such as the purchase of Rabbits & Son in 1903.

George Oliver, born in Leicestershire in 1836, also became a major multiple retailer. After completing his shoemaking apprenticeship he became a journeyman shoemaker and opened his first shop in Walsall in 1860. In 1866 he opened a

Fig. 4. Freeman, Hardy & Willis Ltd, Rutland St., Leicester (from an illustration). (The building was destroyed during a bombing raid in November 1940.)

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39 Leicester Illustrated (Leicester, 1891), p. 60.
40 Leicester Illustrated, p. 60.
41 ROLLR, DE 2357/16. Also BSTJ, 30.6.1905, p. 547.
42 BSTJ, 26.7.1901, p. 106. Rabbits had 70 branches in the London area as well as a factory.
second shop in Neath, followed in 1869 by a small factory in Wolverhampton. By 1875, the business consisted of the factory and over 30 branches, at which time he decided to close the factory and transfer the business to Leicester. A new warehouse was built to service the retail branches, as a result of which the business expanded rapidly to 85 branches in 1885 and 150 in 1892, at which time he claimed to be the largest multiple retailer in the world.

Stephen Hilton started as a currier in Leicester in 1869 and in 1876 produced his first boots. From the outset he had a shop on the premises to sell footwear, leather and thread. He sold the leather business in 1880 to concentrate on manufacturing boots and shoes. By 1883, the business had expanded and he opened his first branch shop in Derby. In 1889 there were 25 branches, 13 of which were located in Lancashire. The business continued to expand and in 1891 Hilton claimed to be the only Leicester manufacturer to sell the whole of his production through his own retail outlets. Having moved factory several times to accommodate the continuous increase in demand, he sold the production side of the business in 1895 to two of his employees in order to concentrate on the retail side. The decision to cease manufacturing was probably influenced by the lockout of 1895. Hilton controlled 99 branches in 1900 and 129 in 1914.

Lennard Bros, Leicester, followed a different path. Established in 1876 as a manufacturer, the firm had developed wholesale and multiple retail businesses. By 1900 the company had over 90 branches trading under the Lennards name. When the founder, Samuel Lennard, died in 1903, his sons ceased wholesale distribution in order to concentrate on manufacturing and promotion of their branded products. A separate company was formed for the multiple retail business, which then moved to Bristol and amalgamated with The Public Benefit Boot Company.

Table 2 shows those firms that dominated the multiple business in 1900, accounting for half the number of branches quoted by Jeffreys. Apart from The Public Benefit Boot Co., all had their headquarters in Leicester. However, it should be mentioned that The Public Benefit Boot Co. was already collaborating with Lennards during the 1890s before being taken over by them in 1905.

A number of smaller multiple retailers were also established in Leicester. When Preston & Co. ceased production in 1882, the partners retained control of the dozen or so shops that were located in towns between the Wash and the Humber. The firm remained a small regional multiple retailer until it was taken over by Freeman, Hardy & Willis in 1894.

Watson & Co. was both manufacturer and retailer. In 1897, the firm had a factory in Chatham Street and 50 retail branches. The company failed in 1904.

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46 Anon, S. Hilton, p. 15.
47 Anon, S. Hilton, p. 18.
48 BSTJ, 30.6.1905, p. 488.
49 Leicester Commemoration Exhibition Catalogue (Leicester, 1897), p. 22.
50 ROLLR, DE1936/46.
J. W. Haylock built a successful wholesale distribution and multiple retail business during the 1890s. In 1898 the firm became a limited company, at which time there were 23 retail branches in London and the provinces. The company expanded and by the end of 1901 had 16 shops in London, and another 15 in 11 provincial towns.\(^{50}\)

Frisby & Co. was established by Joseph Frisby in 1870. By 1905, the firm had over 80 branches in the Midlands, London and the South in 1905.\(^{51}\)

W. E. Briggs & Co. was formed in 1895 as a result of dividing the shoe manufacturing business into two parts: one to produce rubber soles for the industry; and the other continued to trade under the Briggs name and became a multiple retail business.

A number of small multiple retail firms, such as Bronson Shoe Co., The Leicester Boot Co., The Progressive Boot Co. and the British Boot Co., commenced business during the 1890s, but either failed or were taken over by one of the larger firms.

As previously mentioned, a common problem for all multiple retailers was the need to supply a full range of men’s, ladies’ and children’s footwear. Leicester firms had easy access to women’s and children’s footwear as all were manufactured locally. Men’s styles had to be obtained from Northamptonshire. Stead & Simpson opened factories in Daventry and, later, in Northampton, in order to benefit from the town’s reputation for producing high-grade boots.\(^{52}\) W. & E. Turner opened a factory in Desborough about 1884. After initial success, they became concerned at the high cost of production compared with other manufacturers. They went through the same process of cost control as in Leicester.

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Table 2. Largest multiple retailers in 1900.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Firm</th>
<th>Branches</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Freeman, Hardy &amp; Willis</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stead &amp; Simpson</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>George Oliver</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John Tyler</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. &amp; E. Turner</td>
<td>100+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Hilton</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Lennard</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Benefit Boot Co.</td>
<td>90+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,185+</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: BSTJ, 30.6.1905, p. 547.
Anon, Stead & Simpson Centenary, 1834–1934, (unpaginated).
Anon, George Oliver Centenary booklet (1950), p. 7.
Anon, S. Hilton & Sons Ltd., A Century of Service, p. 18.
ROLLR, DE2835, W. & E. Turner, private ledger.
until they finally sold the factory in 1909, thus enabling the firm to concentrate on its retail business. Freeman, Hardy & Willis returned to manufacturing when they bought Rabbits & Co. in 1902, a firm that had 70 shops and a factory in London.

OTHER METHODS OF DISTRIBUTION

The co-operative movement started to sell boots and shoes in 1862 when the Co-operative Wholesale Society bought products from manufacturers for sale through retail societies. Business developed steadily through the decade and the Society opened a factory in 1873 to service its stores. Prior to 1914, boots and shoes were sold in Co-operative stores as part of their clothing departments. Their approach was more akin to village store than specialist shoe retailer.

It is difficult to judge how many shoes were sold through retail branches; in 1934 it was said that no more than 10 per cent of the shoes worn by members were produced co-operatively. Despite this limitation, the Co-operative movement was responsible in 1914 for 7–8 per cent of national footwear sales, or about 6.5 million pairs. By far the largest supplier to co-operative stores was the Co-operative Wholesale Society factory in Leicester, which produced 1,742,966 pairs in 1914.

Most department stores were established between 1860 and 1900, though early forerunners, such as Kendal Milne in Manchester and Bainbridge in Newcastle, commenced business several decades earlier. Both had footwear departments. Kendal Milne incorporated the Manchester Shoe Mart into its store, while Bainbridge developed its range of products as demand required. By 1852, Bainbridge had also developed a wholesale business to service the rural areas of the North East. In 1887 the company established a shoe factory to supply its own shoe department. No other department store is known to have had its own shoe factory.

Department stores became an established but not major retail outlet for footwear. Shoe departments were created within the stores where products from different manufacturers were displayed. Department stores could only carry a limited range of styles and sizes because of the expense involved. The strength of the stores was their ability to order a specific size against a sample that the customer saw and liked, and obtain delivery with the shortest possible delay. A standard-size measurement system was essential for the stores if they were to meet the expectations of their customers.

Boot clubs became another sales outlet for manufacturers, multiples, factors and retailers alike. Clubs were established all over the country, but were especially strong in industrial conurbations, where they catered for customers who could not afford to buy a pair of boots exactly when needed. Purchases, therefore, became

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53 CWS Yearbook 1915, p. 89. Actual period was June 1913–June 1914.
55 An advertisement in St Crispin, 4.1.1873, offered to supply all requisites necessary for starting a
part of a family’s weekly budget that had to be planned in the same way as rent or food.

There were various ways of running a club, but all systems required members to pay a small amount, normally 6d. or 1s. a week, until they had saved sufficient to buy a pair of boots. The time required to save for a pair depended on the type and size of boot required. In some cases money was collected door-to-door, in others a member visited the supplier to make his or her payment. Apart from shoe firms, others, such as Fattorini & Sons, Bradford, used the club principle of trading to supply general household goods and eventually included shoes in their list of products. It is impossible to guess what proportion of total sales were conducted in this way, but it must have been of some importance for the Directors of W. & E. Turner to consider that this type of business was becoming a serious threat. The National Federation of Boot & Shoe Retailers also considered that clubs affected their business to such an extent that they sought ways of banning the club system. One multiple retailer, Frisby & Co., thought it sufficiently profitable to collect weekly subscriptions door-to-door.

Mail-order retailing had existed since the eighteenth century, when there are examples of boots being delivered by carrier. The start of the parcel post service in 1883 provided opportunities to expand this method of selling. In 1905 the catalogue of J. C. Walton, a small London distributor, refers to their mail-order department. Firms such as Royal Welsh Warehouse in Newtown, mid-Wales, Fattorini & Sons, Bradford, Kays of Worcester and Graves of Sheffield developed mail-order sales for a wide range of consumer goods, including boots and shoes, between 1870 and 1900. They were followed by others Universal Stores in Manchester (1900), Freeman’s in London (1905) and Empire Stores (1912) all of whom used the club principle to develop mail-order sales.

Apart from these, other methods of selling lower grade boots and shoes existed that satisfied the needs of certain types of customer. Leather goods of all sorts, including boots and shoes, were a traditional feature of weekly markets. However, weekly markets were losing their importance, especially in industrial towns. Their importance diminished further during the second half of the century, as modern retail establishments, displaying a wider range of products, became more popular with customers. Another form of outlet, the travelling salesman with his cart full of household products, including a few pairs of cheap boots, continued to be a familiar sight in rural villages up to the outbreak of war in 1914.

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57 R. Coopey, S. O’Connell and D. Porter (eds), Mail order Retailing in Britain; a Business and Social History (Oxford, 2005), p. 16.
59 C. Brown, Leicester Voices (Stroud, 2002), p. 61. Weekly subscription was 1s.
60 D. Davis, A History of Shopping (1966), p. 231. In 1736, a letter from Mrs Purefoy of Buckingham acknowledged receipt of shoes by carrier.
61 Coopey, O’Connell and Porter (eds), Mail Order Retailing, pp. 14–17.
63 Jefferys, Retail Trading, p. 11.
BRAND NAMES AND ADVERTISING

In a competitive market, it became necessary for manufacturers and retailers to develop a means of ensuring that customers, having bought one pair of shoes, would return and buy another. Though there were exceptions, it was not standard practice at the middle of the century to place any obvious mark of origin, such as the manufacturer’s name, in a shoe. French manufacturers were first to use brand names when French styles were fashionable during the 1850s. Leicester manufacturers did not generally adopt the use of brand names until they started to improve the quality of their products. Table 3 provides an example of how brand names were used to distinguish one company’s different types of production.

Multiple retail firms considered that their brand was the name over the door. They developed their business by supplying a reasonable product at the lowest possible price and therefore did not wish to add any unnecessary costs. However, as brand names became more prevalent and they recognised that customers found it easier to ask for specific names, multiples began to follow suit as a means of creating customer loyalty. A good example is Tyler’s ‘Relyt’ brand, which became a well-known name.

Co-operative producers were enthusiastic users of brand names. They adopted names, such as Equity, Progress, St Crispin, Young Democrat, Industry and Unity, Oakleaf, and Anchor, that were considered synonymous with the co-operative ideal of self-sufficiency, fairness and natural growth.

Trade cards were the most common method of advertising prior to repeal of the tax on newspaper advertisements in 1853. Trade cards showed the name and address of the firm and details of the service provided, and were used by bespoke shoemakers and independent shoe shops.

Advertising developed rapidly during the 1880s as the number of shops increased. Though newspaper advertising was known from the 1860s, most early shoe industry advertising consisted of billboards and posters. Multiple retailers arranged for staff to deliver handbills to homes in the locality. They emphasised low prices, which they hoped would entice customers to visit the branch.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand</th>
<th>Shoe style</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orchid</td>
<td>Ladies, best quality, in sizes, half sizes and fittings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empress</td>
<td>Ladies, medium prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cert</td>
<td>Football boots</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Renshaw</td>
<td>Tennis shoes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gripwell</td>
<td>Cycling shoes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: BSTJ, 30.6.1905, p. 553.

Table 3. Brand names of Walker, Kempson & Stevens Ltd.

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64 Anon, S. Hilton, p. 21.
65 W. L. Sparks, Shoemaking in Norwich (1949), p. 34.
IN-STOCK SYSTEMS

W. L. Sparks said that James Smith, a Norwich shoemaker, was the first to recognise that most people did not require bespoke shoes and began to provide ready-made shoes about 1792. It is only a small step from making ready-made shoes to consciously building up a stock pending receipt of orders, and by so doing to create an in-stock system. Simple forms of holding shoes in stock existed in London by the middle of the eighteenth century, but the practice developed as demand grew. By the 1850s, the problem had become significant for larger retailers who sold shoes made by more than one shoemaker, as every last maker and shoemaker had his own method of measuring lasts and denoting sizes. Some form of common size measurement was necessary to enable an in-stock system to be controlled. When standardisation was adopted in the 1890s, it completed the final link in a chain that enabled owners and managers of shops to order exactly what they required, knowing that goods supplied would satisfy customer requirements irrespective of where they were produced.

Multiple retailers and factors developed in-stock systems to suit their individual circumstances. Multiples and factors with a strong presence in a particular part of the country would often establish a local warehouse to hold stock nearer to the point of sale; for example, James Lulham’s warehouse in Cardiff.

RETAIL COMPETITION AND CONFLICTING PRIORITIES

The number of shoe shops increased rapidly after 1870. Anyone selling shoes was aware that price was normally the most important element in the decision whether or not to buy a new pair of shoes. Multiple retailers competed between themselves to cut a farthing off the price of standard items. At the same time, they were not beyond making pricing agreements among themselves as when, in 1907, the Directors’ Minutes of one firm report alarm that another multiple had reduced prices ‘contrary to arrangements’. Nevertheless, they helped one another when circumstances were mutually convenient. For instance, two Leicester-based firms agreed that neither would open a shop in a town with a population of 15,000 or more if the other firm already had a branch there. In another case, two firms exchanged unsold items to help unload unwanted stock.

The Boot & Shoe Trades Journal noted in 1881 that independent shoe retailers, generally supplied by wholesale distributors, were having a hard time to compete against multiple retailers, and commented that ‘the increasing number of multiple retail branches had started to change the retail scene’.

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65 W. & E. Turner, Directors’ Minutes (22 July 1907).
66 ROLLR, DE2357/16, agreement between Freeman, Hardy & Willis Ltd and S. Hilton & Sons (8 Sep. 1897).
68 BSTJ, 26.2.1881, p. 97.
69 Directors’ Minutes of W. & E. Turner Ltd stated in 1906 that they had conducted an unsuccessful
The growing power of the multiples and co-operatives had been recognised by the early 1880s, to the extent that small independent traders felt sufficiently threatened to form the National Traders League in 1884. The National Federation of Boot & Shoe Retailers was formed in 1903 to represent independent shops at a national level. Regular sales became a means of attracting customers at times of difficult trading. From the 1860s, advertisements appeared in Leicester newspapers offering discounts of 10–20 per cent. Similar advertisements were to be found in the local press throughout the country.

ANCILLARY SALES

Shops selling only footwear had an advantage over their competitors in so far as they could carry a larger range of styles and sizes, and were very competitive on price. However, this was countered by the disadvantage of being totally dependent on one product. Towards the end of the century both independent and multiple retailers sought to find additional products that would complement footwear sales. Shoe polishes and laces were sold by virtually all retailers, to which items such as gaiters, stockings, socks and umbrellas were added by some. These additional products were sold sometimes, but not always, with success. Multiple retailers usually tried out a new product in one district before introducing it nationwide. 70

REPAIR TRADE

New methods of retailing affected hand-sewn shoemakers and made it more difficult for them to compete with lower-priced, mass-produced goods. However, the introduction of machine-made welted boots after 1890 suddenly increased the quantity of boots and shoes that could and needed to be repaired. Moreover, they could be repaired a number of times. This sequence of events meant that local shoemakers gradually changed from being makers of new boots and shoes to repairers of products that had been bought in a retail shop.

No written reference to the repair of footwear by retail shoe shops appears before the 1870s. This does not mean that boots and shoes were never repaired, rather it suggests that they were repaired by the owner to the best of his ability, as the cost of repair was relatively high and could be 40 per cent of the cost of a new pair. 71 That was not important if the family were sufficiently wealthy, but most people were not in that position.

It is unclear which of the multiple retailers was first to offer a repair service or when that was. The Public Benefit Boot and Shoe Co. opened a repair shop

experiment selling umbrellas. In 1908 an experiment to sell hosiery had been so successful that they decided to expand sales in more branches.

sometime before 1880.72 A letter heading of George Oliver, dated November 1888, stated that ‘boots can be repaired at any shop’.73 By 1891, Tyler had been repairing boots ‘for a number of years’.74 In 1906, W. & E. Turner opened an experimental repair depot in South Wales. The experiment was so successful that, within six months, they opened a repair centre in Cardiff to service the whole of Wales.75

The repair business provided a secondary activity for multiples that neatly complemented their basic business. It also afforded the opportunity of repairing footwear that had been sold by competitors. Those that opened central repair factories reasoned that they could offer a fast return service at a more competitive price than by having a repair unit in each branch. Multiples with their own production units were already buying leather, so little additional effort was required to obtain the materials and equipment to establish a repair factory.

**SUMMARY**

The population of the British Isles increased threefold during the nineteenth century. This rapid increase, combined with Britain’s early industrialisation and the resulting migration from rural to urban living, set the scene for changes in the methods of retail distribution. At the beginning of the century all types of customer bought direct from a market or producer/retailer. By the end of the century, this type of trading had been displaced by wholesale distributors, specialist independent shoe shops, multiple retailers, department stores and co-operative stores. These new retail methods would not have expanded so quickly without the rapid growth of the railway network and development of new forms of communication. The postal service, telegraph and finally the telephone enabled fast, cheap contact to be made between customers and their suppliers. Introduction of parcel post in 1883 simplified the transport of very small packages and helped to develop mail-order business.

Distributors, multiples, independent retailers, department stores, the co-operative movement and latterly mail order prospered in these new circumstances. By 1914, wholesale distributors and multiple retailers accounted for between 60 and 70 per cent of all sales. Between 1870 and 1914, Leicester became the undisputed headquarters of multiple retailing and the second most important centre for wholesale distributors. Development of these new methods of retailing had an important effect on other aspects of retailing. As retail methods became more sophisticated during the final quarter of the century, brand names became an important means by which firms and their products could be better identified in a very competitive market.

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73 It is unclear whether repairs were undertaken on site or farmed out to local shoemakers.
74 *Leicester Illustrated* (Leicester, 1891), p. 60.
75 W. & E. Turner, Directors Minutes (13 Aug. 1906).
One unexpected development was the growth of repairs as an integral part of multiple retailers’ business, with firms either establishing a repair facility in each branch or creating a larger facility to service a region. Independent retailers did not establish their own repair facilities, preferring to leave it to local traditional shoemaker/repairers. This offered an opportunity for the traditional shoemaker to repair shoes that had been sold by all retailers. Consequently, the traditional shoemaker changed from being a producer to a repairer. He still made boots and shoes, but the majority of his work and income consisted of repairing machine-made products.

The success of multiple retail companies and wholesale distributors benefited Leicester in many ways. Large-scale buyers encouraged manufacturers to adopt the most modern manufacturing techniques, which enabled Leicester firms to become the largest producers of value-for-money boots and shoes. This combination of production and distribution served the town well for over a century, and between 1850 and 1900 changed it from being one of the poorest to one of the wealthiest towns in the country.

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**Abbreviations**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSTJ</td>
<td>Boot &amp; Shoe Trades Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLN</td>
<td>Shoe &amp; Leather News</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NUBSO</td>
<td>National Union of Boot &amp; Shoe Operatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ROLLR</td>
<td>Record Office for Leicester, Leicestershire &amp; Rutland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TLAHS</td>
<td>Transactions of the Leicestershire Archaeological &amp; Historical Society</td>
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