

The forgotten grandeur of Britain's department stores - a historian reflects

Department stores seem to be in terminal decline. In the UK, the demise of [British Home Stores and Poundworld](#), together with store closures by [Marks and Spencer](#) and [House of Fraser](#), are local symptoms of a wider malaise. Luxurious Parisian store La Samaritaine [closed in 2005](#) and Sears - once a cornerstone of North American retailing - has also [shut dozens of stores](#) in recent years.



©tupungato via [123RF](#)

The job losses and economic fallout from these closures are enough cause for upset. But what makes this decline all the more significant is the role that department stores have played in shaping towns and cities for the last 150 years or more. Their closure casts a shadow of doubt over high streets and town centres across the UK. That's why it's worth reminding ourselves what is being lost – and why department stores are so special.

Most department stores in Britain started small, often as drapers – such as [House of Fraser](#). They grew bit by bit, adding new lines and gradually growing their premises through piecemeal acquisition. By the early 20th century, most small towns had a department store and many larger centres had several competing for customers or targeting different social groups.

Regional chains of stores grew in the early decades of the 20th century, but many were swallowed up – along with a large number of independent stores – by national chains such as Debenhams, the Drapery Trust and later House of Fraser. Carefully tracing stores through [trade directories](#) reveals 600 or more department stores across Britain by the 1930s. Their influence was widespread, even though they never enjoyed more than about [5% of total retail sales](#).



Selfridges becomes most awarded department store in IGDS history

1 Jun 2018



Shaping the high street

The impact of department stores on the high street grew with the size of their premises. The companies built large, integrated stores – such as Beatties (lately House of Fraser) [in Wolverhampton](#), which occupied most of a block in the

centre of town. Once established, these stores often became linchpins around which other shops congregated, drawn by the growing footfall.

Architects and planners have been inspired by the pulling power of department stores when designing successive generations of shopping centres – from Milton Keynes Shopping Centre, in which John Lewis was the linchpin, to the Trafford Centre in Manchester and Bull Ring in Birmingham, both of which have Selfridge's as their “anchor store”. Such monumental buildings were designed to impress, of course. But they were also needed to accommodate an ever-expanding range of goods.



©Sung Kuk Kim via [123RF](#)

As early as the 1870s, the unlikely-sounding Civil Service Supply Association in London [boasted that](#) it sold “anything from a blotting-pad to a bicycle or a billiard table – from ginger beer to carte Blanche champagne”. The range and scale of this operation made such stores the Amazon of their day – and unsurprisingly, they drew howls of protest from small retailers, who complained about unfair competition from leviathans.

As with Amazon, department stores introduced innovative new technology, such as elevators, escalators and air purification systems, as well as new systems of stock control that allowed them to track which stock lines were selling well and which were slow moving. Many also operated both in-store and mail-order businesses, sending out price lists and receiving orders by the thousands.

Putting on a show

By the 1890s, some large stores were doing as much as one third of their business by post, and developed separate departments to [deal with demand](#). Yet the physical shop remained the cornerstone of the department store's business. And it was the experience of coming into the shop that marked department stores as different from most other shops. There was a growing emphasis on the display of goods, both in the shop window and inside the shop.

Plenty of other shops had their wares out on display, but department stores offered their customers a different scale of choice and variety in the things that could be seen and handled.

American visitors were wont to complain about “shop-walkers”, who escorted well-heeled customers between departments and discouraged the “wrong type” of person from entering the shop. But these were most evident in larger London stores: browsing was encouraged by many shops and advertisements reassured customers that there was no obligation to buy.

Self-service was pioneered in some stores, such as Lewis’s, but counter service remained the norm through to the interwar years and beyond, and persists today in lines such as perfume and make-up.

What really marked out department stores was the array of services that they offered in addition to the goods on sale. They provided toilets, restrooms and tearooms, which kept women in particular in the store for longer, increasing the opportunity for sales. There were also fashion shows, string quartets, Santa at Christmas, exhibitions and art galleries, roof-top golf courses, balloon launches and even novelty acts such as a girl, [hired by Bentall's in Kingston](#), who would dive 20 metres into a tank of water.

This is what made the department store more than a shop: it was a place to go, a place where memories were made. Today, online retailers can offer a much greater array of goods, often at much keener prices than is possible in-store. What department stores have lost, perhaps, is the excitement that they once held as an experience. If they can find ways to reclaim that magic, then perhaps their prospects won’t be so bleak, after all.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Stobart, Professor of History, *Manchester Metropolitan University*

For more, visit: <https://www.bizcommunity.com>