

RETAILERS AND CONSUMER CHANGES IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN EUROPE

‘A settled little society of trading people’? The eighteenth-century retail community of an English county town

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Writing in 1726, Daniel Defoe emphasised the importance to the retailer of ‘a settled little society of trading people who understand business, and are carrying on trade in the same manner as himself’. What he had in mind here was a socio-economic network which could ‘teach the tradesman more than apprenticeship’ and through which business could be negotiated and generated.¹ Recent academic analysis has underscored the importance that Defoe accorded to these networks. New institutionalist perspectives within business history view these networks as important economic structures which provided mechanisms for the transmission of capital, allowed commercial risk to be shared, discouraged malfeasance, and facilitated access to reliable business information.² Moreover, networking amongst tradesmen helped to create a common moral system – a set of ‘shared attitudes, goals and aspirations’³ – so that inclusion in a network was dependent upon being ‘known’ and trustworthy, making personal reputation central to the commercial life of all tradesmen.⁴

These perspectives have afforded important insights into the operation of early modern business,⁵ but they all view networks as social constructions, giving little consideration to how they were shaped by space. This links to a wider neglect of the essentially spatial nature of retailing during the early modern period: we concentrate on the sociology rather than the geography of shopping. Yet shops were ranged along streets in a particular sequence and shoppers moved along these streets and between these shops when choosing and buying goods. This physical ordering of spaces could influence people’s experience of and behaviour whilst engaged in shopping. However, beyond broadly identifying a town’s premier shopping streets or the location of key markets, little attempt is made to assess the ways in which the micro-geography of retailing might shape consumer behaviour, much less the networks of tradesmen who comprised the retail sector of the town.⁶

A comprehensive review of the spatiality of early-modern retailing is impossible here. The aim of this paper is to make a modest start towards such a project by focusing on a single street in Chester in the middle part of the eighteenth century. I start by drawing on a unique contemporary survey to outline the retail micro-geography of Eastgate Street, Chester’s main shopping thoroughfare, in c.1754: what shops were found there and how were they arranged? This is then used as a springboard to investigate the ways in which these tradesmen were tied together into a network: to what extent did they form a distinct group within the wider urban society of Chester? Finally, the paper assesses the continuity (the ‘settled’ nature) of the society of tradesmen found in Eastgate Street: did the network link people across time as well as space?

At the end of the eighteenth century, Chester was described as ‘a sort of provincial metropolis, not only to its own county but to the neighbouring counties’.⁷ It had three major fairs, a thriving market and a large number of shops: 276 tradesmen and professionals being listed in the *Universal British Directory* of 1797. As in many English towns, Chester’s

retailers were concentrated into the major thoroughfares.⁸ However, the scope for such concentration was considerably enhanced by the presence along each of the ‘Rows’: raised galleries set above the street level shops. Whilst metropolitan visitors frequently decried these for making the ‘city look both old and ugly’,⁹ they effectively doubled the retail frontage of the main streets. By the time the city’s first trade directory was published in 1782, over 80 per cent of high status shops were found on just four streets: Northgate Street, Watergate Street, Bridge Street and Eastgate Street.¹⁰ The last of these was the most important, containing both the main market (although the shambles were on Northgate Street and the coal market on Bridge Street) and the highest concentration of fixed shops. Indeed, it was probably this significance that led Peter Broster, a printer and one of the city’s aldermen, to note down the inhabitants of each of the shops and houses in the street. His map lists ninety individual tradesmen who, taken as a whole, offered a broad range of commodities or services (see Table 1). Walking along Eastgate Street gave the eighteenth-century consumer access to a world of goods, some made by local craftsmen and others imported from distant countries. However, rather than being spread evenly along the street, they were concentrated into distinct zones, creating a remarkable micro-geography of retailing on this single street.

Table 1. Shopkeepers and tradesmen on Eastgate Street, Chester c.1754

	South-side row	South-side street	North-side row/street	Total
Textiles dealers	10	0	1	11
Luxury goods dealers	4	0	2	6
Professionals	3	2	5	10
Butchers	0	12	0	12
Inns	0	2	6	8
Other victuallers	1	5	6	12
Craftsmen (clothing)	2	2	7	11
Craftsmen (metal & wood)	3	1	10	14
Miscellaneous/unknown	1	0	5	6
Total	24	24	42	90

Source: Cheshire and Cheshire Archive (CCA) CR 63/2/133/17

The north side of the street contained a heterogeneous mix of food shops, inns, craftsmen, dealers and professionals, with little apparent ordering of the retail space. The south side was very different, however: the street level shops contained a large number of victuallers, especially butchers, who operated from what were effectively lock-up shops. On the row above them were an altogether different class of retailer, including two each of goldsmiths, toyshops and apothecaries; a silk mercer, three woollen drapers and six linen drapers. These textile dealers dominated at the west end of the Row taking seven of the eight shops overlooking the High Cross: traditionally the commercial heart of the city. It was this area which mid-nineteenth-century guidebooks were describing as having a ‘decided preference ... shops let here at high rents and are in never-failing request’.¹¹ Yet it is clear that it already established as the preferred location a century earlier. Much as in any modern city, then, there

were marked differences in the occupants and desirability of different parts of retail space of Chester. What is striking is the detailed level at which these distinctions operated. These clusters must have influenced shopping behaviour and retail practices,¹² but to what extent were they mirrored in the structure of the retail community? Was there one 'little society of tradesmen' on Eastgate Street or several, each linked to wider networks based more on specialism than on geography?

It is no easy matter determining the extent to which Eastgate Street defined a community, rather than simply a collection, of shopkeepers. One key problem is establishing and discovering the evidence which would allow us to define such a society. We have no membership lists (of guilds or social clubs, for example) and no detailed diaries through which to trace connections.¹³ Instead, we must rely upon a series of more impressionistic records. Wills, administration bonds, apprenticeship indentures and corporation minutes provide considerable evidence that the tradesmen of Eastgate Street knew and trusted one another, but they afford only glimpses of what were clearly wider and deeper networks.¹⁴ Of the ninety individuals listed by Broster, some record has so far been found for thirty-four shopkeepers. These identify definite links between seventeen tradesmen, a figure which, if extrapolated to the street as a whole, suggests that around half of its inhabitants had close dealings with one another of a personal, commercial or civic nature. For some tradesmen, the level of interaction was limited, contact being with just one other inhabitant of the street. Thomas Wilbraham, for example, acted as executor for his near neighbour George Totty, as did John Bridge for Thomas Broster.¹⁵ However, most tradesmen for whom links have been found were enmeshed within a single highly complex web of interaction which was knitted together by multiple connections based on membership of the corporation, arrangements for probate or family ties – sometimes all three (Figure 1).

Involvement in the corporation provided a strong bond for the individuals involved. It created a nexus of retailer-aldermen at the heart of the city's economic, social and political life, and cemented ties of mutual trust and regard. Although formal meetings of the corporation were infrequent, a large amount of work was devolved onto committees on which Eastgate Street tradesmen appear to have been very active.¹⁶ Thomas Maddock and Richard Richardson, for instance, were empowered to review the corporation's silver, exchanging old items for 'useful and fashionable plate'. Along with Ralph Probert, Richard Brock and Thomas Broster, they also served on a committee set up to inspect the expenses of the corporation. Such work drew these tradesmen together in a community of interest: John Parker and Thomas Brock combining with others to complain to the corporation that 'foreigners' were keeping open shop in the city and petitioning for relief.¹⁷

This was, however, a community based on the city as a geographic and political entity, rather than the street as a lived social and economic space. Something of the latter can be revealed through analysis of probate records, more particularly those acting as an executor or witness to a will. People were selected for these roles on the basis of a variety of factors, amongst them convenience, trust, professional or business expertise, and prestige. As Table 2 reveals, over two-fifths of executors and one-fifth of witnesses were drawn from neighbours on Eastgate Street. The former reflects the large number of wives appointed executrix and the latter suggests that convenience may have been an over-riding factor when choosing witnesses: easier to get the neighbour to pop in than drag a friend half way across town. However, the selection of both witnesses and executors was a much more thought-through process than this allows, and thus reveals far more meaningful relationships. Both roles involved a degree of intimacy with the personal and financial lives of the testator, and

executors especially would become closely involved in family and business affairs. Trust was therefore a pre-requisite. This might be built on family ties, links through the corporation or neighbourliness. Thus, Robert Davies appointed his wife Elizabeth and his neighbour and son-in-law John Orange as executors, whilst Thomas Broster had his will witnessed by two fellow aldermen and appointed a third to act alongside his brother as executor.¹⁸

Table 2. Interpersonal relationship revealed in probate records of Eastgate Street tradesmen

	Related trades	Other retailing	Gentry	Other	Unknown	Total N	Total %
<i>Executors</i>							
Eastgate	5	3	0	0	17	25	41.0
Chester	9	5	6	8	2	30	49.2
Elsewhere	0	1	1	2	2	6	9.8
Total						61	
<i>Witnesses</i>							
Eastgate	1	6	0	1	1	9	20.0
Chester	3	4	6	7	15	35	77.8
Elsewhere	0	0	0	0	1	1	2.2
Total						45	

Source: probate records held at CCA

Overlying and reinforcing such priorities was the need for professional knowledge or expertise. Attorneys appeared as witnesses on several wills, and were probably involved in drafting the documents as well as witnessing their authenticity.¹⁹ More general, though, was the use of individuals from related trades to act as executors, especially when the business might be complex or the stock-in-trade particularly specialised, as with textile dealing. On occasions, it reflected strong cross-town links forged through trading contacts (as with William Littleton who had his will witnessed by fellow gardeners from Boughton and Further Northgate Street²⁰), but could also lead to distinct spatial clusters of testators, executors and witnesses. The textile dealers on the south side Row of Eastgate Street formed a particularly intense cluster of linkages with six of the seven appointing neighbouring dealers as executors (Figure 1).

In addition to the pragmatic considerations that encouraged such a spatial-economic nexus, it is clear that some individuals were drawing on wider associations to make statements about their standing in the wider community. Naming fellow aldermen can be viewed in this light, but it is perhaps more evident in the appointment of gentlemen as executors. William Littleton followed this strategy in appointing two members of the city gentry as his executors, but George French's attempts to do the same were undermined as both of his nominated executors renounced their authority, leaving his wife and son to administer the estate.²¹ Despite the demands put upon executors, such practice was comparatively rare. Indeed, acting as a witness and particularly an executor could enhance the status of the individual involved, raising the regard in which they were held by the wider urban or trading community. Such people were viewed as prominent and trusted citizens: what d'Cruze refers to as community brokers.²² In network theory, these key intermediaries are seen as the messengers who 'do the work of keeping networks connected'.²³ Can these vital players be

seen amongst the tradesmen of Eastgate Street? Certainly men like Thomas Croughton, John Orange and later Robert Aldersey formed important focal points in the complex network identified earlier. Yet such centrality is often a matter of perspective. Indeed, we might go further and suggest that these networks resembled the rhizomatic structures theorised by Deleuze and Guattari in the context of knowledge and thought.²⁴ They were networks of multiple and branching roots, 'with no central axis, no unified point of origin, and no given direction of growth'.²⁵

The webs of contact spun by tradesmen were not without purpose, of course: inter-personal bonds helped to create what Fukuyama terms a 'radius of trust' which spread across space and time.²⁶ This trust, and the personal bonds which both created and reflected it, gave continuity to the retail continuity, making it a '*settled* little society of tradesmen'. This continuity was assisted by the longevity of certain tradesmen or their businesses. Twenty-eight of the ninety businesses listed by Broster can be traced in directories from the 1780s.²⁷ For some individuals – such as the cabinetmaker, Thomas Astle, or the linen draper, Mrs Bowers – this meant trading lives stretching for thirty years or more. For others, it involved passing on a successful business to their sons. Thus we see the glover John Finchett leaving his 'messuage, dwelling house and shop' on Eastgate Street (as well as others on Watergate Street and Commonhall Lane) to his son Thomas, who duly appears in the trade directories as a glover on Eastgate Street.²⁸ More unusually, the woollen draper Robert Aldersey appears to have been set up in business by his mother who is listed on Broster's map as a clothier and householder. This gives Aldersey particular significance: his drapery business reflects continuity with an earlier generation of tradesmen, and his activities as executor and witness to his older neighbours gave him a pivotal role in the articulation of their social and commercial networks, and offered a bridge to the next generation.

Continuity was affected not only through the nuclear family, of course: in the absence of sons, a business might be passed to more distant relatives. William Littleton bequeathed his gardens, plants, frames, gardening tools and flower books to his cousin, George Geary, and Thomas Croughton, perhaps a little more hard-nosed, directed that his shop and stock be sold to his nephew Charles Croughton at their current value (legacies to eleven nephews and nieces, included Charles, being paid out of the proceeds).²⁹ Such bequests aimed to retain wealth within the family, but they also helped to integrate the young tradesman into the social and commercial networks of the previous generation in much the same way as a formal apprenticeship might do. Connections to suppliers and the goodwill of an established customer network were important; so too – as Defoe makes abundantly clear – was the fraternity of fellow tradesmen. Such social integration could also be achieved through formal institutions, most notably the city corporation. Retail tradesmen were becoming increasingly prominent in this area and it is notable how often one retailer replaced another as a councilman or alderman. For example, the cutler Thomas Broster was elected as alderman in 1748 in place of Nathan Wright, ironmonger, and John Bridge, an upholsterer, was replaced on his death in 1780 by a woollen draper called John Larden.³⁰ This succession of retailer-aldermen no doubt reflected and bolstered their rising status in the town, but it also helped to incorporate younger tradesmen into a select and influential group.

In many ways, this discussion of the means by which retailer networks were maintained through time as well as space reflects their broader socio-spatial structure. That there was, indeed, a '*settled* little society of trading people' on Eastgate Street in the third quarter of the eighteenth century is as apparent as it is unsurprising. It was, of course, an open network:

inclusive of new tradesmen locating on the street and stretching out into the wider commercial, urban and civic community. But it was also a society which contained within it two alternative foci. One was civic and drew in members of the city corporation. Their common interest in the running of the city's affairs gave them a forum through which important social and commercial bonds could be cemented. At the same time, their status as aldermen underlined their reputation as tradesmen: they were prominent citizens to be trusted in matters of both a business and private nature. The other was more overtly spatial and economic, centring on the textile dealers who dominated the desirable commercial area on the Row along the south side of the street. They drew on each other's professional knowledge to assist in social reproduction through business continuity and cultural integration. These two communities were brought together through everyday interaction on the street and in the social links of their members.

Notes

- ¹ D. Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman* (1726: reprinted, Stroud, 1987), p.33.
- ² R. Pearson and D. Richardson, 'Business networking in the industrial revolution', *Economic History Review*, 54 (2001), p.657; R. Westerfield, *Middlemen in English Business, 1660-1760* (New Haven, 1915), 382-90.
- ³ M. Casson and M.B. Rose, 'Institutions and the evolution of modern business', *Business History*, 39 (1997), p.3. See also F. Fukuyama, *Trust: the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (Harmondsworth, 1995), pp.154-7.
- ⁴ A. Offer, 'Between the gift and the market: the economy of regard', *Economic History Review*, 50 (1997), pp.450-76; Pearson and Richardson, 'Business networking', p.672.
- ⁵ In the context of retailing, see N. Cox, *The Complete Tradesman. A Study of Retailing, 1550-1850* (Aldershot, 2000), pp.176-94.
- ⁶ In contrast, this type of analysis looms large in studies of nineteenth-century department stores. See, for example, J. Stobart, 'City centre retailing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: structure and processes', in J. Benson and L. Ugolini (eds) *A Nation of Shopkeepers: a history of retailing in Britain 1550-2000* (London, 2003), 155-78; E. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure. Women and the Making of London's West End* (Princeton, 2000).
- ⁷ J. Aikin, *A Description of the Country from Thirty to Forty Miles round Manchester* (London, 1795), p.388.
- ⁸ H-C Mui and L.H Mui, *Shops and Shopkeeping in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1989), pp.124-7.
- ⁹ D. Defoe, *A Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* (1724-6: Penguin edition, Harmondsworth, 1971), p.392.
- ¹⁰ J. Stobart, and A. Hann, 'Retailing revolution in the eighteenth century: evidence from north-west England', *Business History*, 46:2 (2004), p.179.
- ¹¹ H. Roberts, *The Chester Guide* (Chester, 1851), p.65.
- ¹² See H. Berry, 'Polite consumption: shopping in eighteenth-century England', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 12 (2002), pp.375-94; Hann, A. & Stobart, J. 'Sites of consumption: the display of goods in provincial shops in eighteenth century England', *Cultural and Social History*, 1:3 (2004).
- ¹³ Cox, *Complete Tradesman*, pp.176-94, draws heavily on such records in her discussion of shopkeepers socio-economic linkages.
- ¹⁴ Further analysis will explore the links revealed in parish registers, court and bankruptcy records and church membership.
- ¹⁵ CCA, WS 1762 George Totty of Chester; WS 1758 Thomas Broster of Chester.
- ¹⁶ *Victoria County History of Cheshire, Volume V, Part 1. The City of Chester* (London, 2003), pp.134-7.
- ¹⁷ CCA, A/B/4/145, A/B/4/130v, A/B/4/8v.
- ¹⁸ CCA, WS 1766 Robert Davies of Chester; WS 1758 Thomas Broster of Chester.
- ¹⁹ See A. Owens 'Property, will making and estate disposal in an industrial town, 1800-1857', in J. Stobart and A. Owens (eds) *Urban Fortunes. Property and Inheritance in the Town, 1700-1900* (Aldershot, 2000), 79-107.
- ²⁰ CCA, WS 1758 William Littleton of Chester.
- ²¹ CCA, WS 1790 George French of Chester.
- ²² S. d'Cruze, 'The middling sort in eighteenth-century Colchester', in J. Barry and C. Brooks (eds), *The Middling Sort of People: Culture, Society and Politics in England, 1550-1800* (London, 1994), 190-99.
- ²³ N. Thrift, 'Actor-network theory', in R.J. Jonhston et al (eds) *The Dictionary of Human Geography* (fourth edition, Oxford, 2001), p.5.
- ²⁴ Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis, 1987).
- ²⁵ Grosz, E. 'A thousand tiny sexes: feminism and rhizomatics', in C. Boundas and D. Olkowski (eds) *Gilles Deleuze and the Theater of Philosophy* (New York, 1994), 199.
- ²⁶ F. Fukuyama, *Trust: the Social Virtues and the Creation of Prosperity* (Harmondsworth, 1995), 155-7.
- ²⁷ E. Dyke (ed.) 'Chester's Earliest Directories', *Journal of the Chester Archaeological Society*, XXXVII, (1949); *Baileys British Directory* (London, 1784).
- ²⁸ CCA, WS 1787 John Finchett of Chester.
- ²⁹ CCA, WS 1758 William Littlewon of Chester; WS 1751 Thomas Croughton of Chester.
- ³⁰ CCA, A/B/4/123v, A/B/4/336v.