# SHOPS, SHOPKEEPERS, AND THE WORKING-CLASS COMMUNITY: PRESTON, 1860–1890

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## I

Shopkeeping is a subject which has been largely neglected by historians of the nineteenth century, falling, as it does, outside the mainstream issues of industrialization. However, it should not be underrated, for it was the mass of small shopkeepers who were responsible for supplying the needs of the large and ever growing populations of the industrial towns. Shops performed an essential part in the distribution network, acting as intermediaries between producer and consumer.

Earlier studies of nineteenth-century shopkeeping were mainly limited to the debate about when fixed shop retailing developed as opposed to market or itinerant trading, and to the rise of co-operative, multiple and department stores.[1] More recently, Winstanley[2] has redressed the balance by considering shopkeepers in their social and political contexts, as well as in economic terms. However, he is more concerned with traditional middle-class retailers than their working-class counterparts.

The area of working-class shopkeeping is only just beginning to receive attention. Benson,[3] in his pioneering study of 'penny capitalists', devotes a chapter to working-class retailing activities. In this he considers the capital cost of opening and stocking a shop, the problems encountered in running the business, and the struggle for survival. The work relies heavily on oral evidence. The recent research

undertaken by Hosgood[4] looks at what he terms 'domestic' (that is working-class) and principal shopkeepers in Leicester. However, his study of domestic shopkeepers is limited to calculating their survival rate and evaluating their role and position within the working-class community.

No study, so far, has addressed the question: Who were these working-class shopkeepers? The traditional stereotype has been derived almost exclusively from autobiographical and literary sources, without factual or statistical confirmation. Yet identification of the physical characteristics and family circumstances which distinguish shopkeepers from others in the local community are surely the key to understanding why working-class people entered business, and their probability of success. Little is known about the long-term stability of these small shops and the factors which could influence their viability. This paper intends to shed some light on these neglected issues.

In order to gain such detailed information on shops and their keepers within a working-class community, a small in-depth study was carried out. The Plungington area of Preston in Lancashire was chosen for the case study. Prior to the nineteenth century Preston had been a pleasant old market town and centre for fashionable society. Industrialization transformed it into the grimy 'Coketown' described by Dickens in *Hard Times*. Preston became an important cotton manufacturing town involved in both spinning and weaving, and as a result, the population rose substantially from 17,350 in 1811 to 96,537 in 1881. The town displayed all the social ills of overcrowding and disease inherent in such unprecedented expansion. The area known as Plungington was built on the north-west outskirts of Preston between the 1850s and 1890s to accommodate the increasing factory population of the town. It represents a typical Victorian working-class neighbourhood, characterized by its long rows of terraced houses cramped together in a gridiron pattern. Plungington quickly became a self-contained community, developing its own infrastructure of churches, schools, public houses and shops. The shops were clearly established for the working class by the working class, for there is little evidence of either lock-up shops or middle-class 'high street' shop infiltration.

The study of small shopkeepers is hampered by the shortage of source materials, which partly accounts for its neglect by historians. Few shopkeepers in working-class areas left records, and their businesses were too small to appear in bankruptcy courts. The main sources used for this study were the three census enumerators' returns between 1861 and 1881, and various trade directories covering the same period. Several problems were encountered in their use: it proved difficult to assess the accuracy of the trade directories in terms of the comprehensiveness of their data, whilst a lack of uniformity in the categories used to define trades, both between different trade directories and the census returns, and over time, caused a further dilemma. In particular, there was no clear demarcation between the terms general shopkeeper, provision dealer and grocer. The only conclusion to be drawn was that these terms were synonymous, and used interchangeably by the various sources. This study has used the umbrella of 'general shopkeeper' for all three categories, although some grocers may have been specialist dealers. Using the census as a source is beset with difficulty when attempting to define occupations. It is not always possible to ascertain whether someone described, for instance, as a baker or a grocer actually ran a shop as opposed to just working in one. This can lead to a gross exaggeration of the figures. In order to guard against this, the sample of shopkeepers from the census was confined to those who could be verified in a trade directory, except where it was clear from the census alone.

The definition of a shop also presented a problem. Is, for example, a hairdresser considered to be a shop or a service? Similarly, were craft workshops like shoemakers' and blacksmiths', where the products were both created and sold on the premises, shops? Did dressmakers, working from the home, have a shop at all? In view of these difficulties, it was decided to restrict the sample to food and general shops, which represented the majority of working-class shops.

Inevitably, a detailed study of this nature can only produce a small but suggestive sample. Research using limited samples can be misleading, if not inaccurate, but in cases such as this, an in-depth study can reinforce and

embellish what is known about a subject in ways not open to larger more formal studies. Working-class shopkeeping is community based and should be researched accordingly.

## II

What then, is the nature of the working-class shopkeeper, as presented by contemporary and autobiographical sources, and by historians? Benson[5] has argued tht shopkeeping tended to be the domain of middle-aged skilled male artisans, with some capital, who saw it as a means of gaining independence from wage labour. Yet, in contemporary sources, the small shop in working-class areas was, in many cases, seen to be run by women. The mother of Robert Roberts[6] and the grandmother of John Paton[7] both ran shops to help support their families. Women shopkeepers are frequently depicted in working-class autobiographies, and descriptions such as 'Mabel Beardoll's greengrocer's'[8] or 'Mrs Pimbley's shop'[9] are common. Booth[10] in his study of the East End of London commented that many of the little general shops were kept by women. Likewise, Winstanley[11] considered the practice of keeping a shop to be 'the resort of . . . widows and wives of labourers trying to eke out a living'. Widows, in particular, were often portrayed as shopkeepers, and in Bolton, according to Alice Foley,[12] 'small cramped stores [were] usually kept by disabled miners and widows'. There are other references to disabled shopkeepers, as in Kathleen Davenport's[13] description of a shop 'run by a small deformed woman'. The unemployed were also thought to take up shopkeeping; in *The history of Mr Polly* H. G. Wells[14] commented that many shopkeepers 'are people who have . . . been thrown out of employment'. Winstanley[15] has suggested that unskilled migrants may have taken up shopkeeping. Traditionally, then, the role of the small shopkeeper has been seen as the preserve of middle-aged men seeking independence; of elderly widows and spinsters attempting to eke out a living; or of people who had fallen on hard times.

How accurate are these portrayals? In order to answer this question, a sample of 107 shopkeepers from the Plungington area was analysed, and compared with the characteristics of the general population of Plungington, as derived from the 1881 census returns.[16] In terms of age (table 1), shopkeepers show a slight tendency to be older than the Plungington heads of household as a whole, 59% being over forty compared with 50% of the population heads. The difference is not so marked as the traditional stereotype would suggest, although the number of shopkeepers in the middle-aged range of forty-one to fifty is significant. However, if the different types of shopkeepers are segregated according to age, it becomes clear that there was a heavier concentration of the over-forties in the general shopkeeper category, 65% compared with 38% in the specialist category. As the vast majority were general shopkeepers in Plungington, the tendency for shopkeepers to be older is increased. One possible explanation of the data might be that all shopkeepers started up in business young, but that specialist shops were increasing more rapidly than general shops around this time, hence the prominence of specialist shopkeepers below forty years of age. This tends to assume that shopkeepers survived over many years, and that the young general shopkeepers who established businesses in the 1860s would be over forty by 1881. However, this theory cannot be upheld, for general shopkeepers had very low survival rates, as will be shown later. A more likely explanation is that specialist shopkeepers entered the trade at an earlier age through apprenticeships, and as Plungington was a developing area it would be likely to attract newly trained people just setting up in business. Therefore, specialist shopkeepers, who had a better survival rate, would tend to mature with the area. In contrast, general shopkeeping, which required little or no training, would be accessible to older people.

TABLE 1 *Age structure of shopkeepers and heads of household in Plungington, 1881*

| *Age* | *Shopkeepers* | | | | *Household heads* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *General* | *Special* | *Total* | | | |
| 20 & under | 0 | 0 | 0 | (0%) | 14 | (1%) |
| 21–30 | 15 | 4 | 19 | (18%) | 344 | (22%) |
| 31–40 | 14 | 11 | 25 | (23%) | 428 | (27%) |
| 41–50 | 29 | 7 | 36 | (34%) | 386 | (25%) |
| 51–60 | 15 | 2 | 17 | (16%) | 233 | (15%) |
| 61–70 | 8 | 0 | 8 | (7%) | 123 | (8%) |
| over 70 | 2 | 0 | 2 | (2%) | 32 | (2%) |
| Total | 83 | 24 | 107 | (100%) | 1560 | (100%) |

General shopkeepers also include provision dealers and grocers.
Specialist shopkeepers include butchers, bakers, greengrocers, and fishmongers.

Analysis of the Plungington shopkeepers by sex and marital status (table 2) shows that three quarters of them were men, 95% of whom were married. In contrast, the majority of the female shopkeepers were either widows (33%) or spinsters (22%). It should be noted, however, that the sample does not reflect the true number of female shopkeepers, because of the male-oriented stance of the sources, which have a tendency to list shops under a husband's name when it was the wife who actually ran the shop. Seven cases were clearly identified in this sample, but it is impossible to know the real extent of the problem. When the sample is broken down by sex and shop type, it is evident that the greatest proportion of females were general shopkeepers. Apart from bakers, the specialist shops were kept exclusively by men. When comparing the shopkeepers with the Plungington heads of household, the obvious conclusion to be drawn is that the vast majority of both samples were married. Spinsters account for the significantly higher figure for single people involved in shopkeeping.

It has been claimed that small shopkeepers were often

TABLE 2 *Sex and marital status of shopkeepers and heads of household in Plungington, 1881*

| *Marital status* | *Shopkeepers* | | | | | | *Household heads* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *General* | | *Specialist* | | *Total* | | | |
| | *m* | *f* | *m* | *f* | | | | |
| Married | 56 | 11 | 20 | 1 | 88 | (82%) | 1294 | (83%) |
| Single | 2 | 5 | 0 | 1 | 8 | (7%) | 77 | (3%) |
| Widowed | 2 | 7 | 0 | 2 | 11 | (10%) | 189 | (12%) |
| Total | 83 | | 24 | | 107 | (99%) | 1560 | (100%) |

m = male f = female

*Note*: The 99% total reflects the inaccuracy of rounding the percentages.

unskilled migrants who would have little opportunity of obtaining one of the better-paid factory jobs. Most factory workers were trained in the factory discipline and skills in their youth, and it was difficult for adults to adapt to them in later life. The employment prospects of the unskilled adult migrant were, therefore, limited to labouring jobs and, for the more enterprising or those with some capital, shopkeeping. Table 3 suggests that shopkeepers had a

TABLE 3 *Origins of shopkeepers and heads of household in Plungington, 1881*

| *Place of birth* | *Household heads* | | *Shopkeepers* | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Preston | 746 | (48%) | 42 | (39%) |
| Within 20 miles of Preston | 504 | (32%) | 46 | (43%) |
| Elsewhere in Lancashire | 118 | (8%) | 10 | (9%) |
| Outside Lancsashire | 192 | (12%) | 9 | (8%) |
| Total | 1560 | (100%) | 107 | (99%) |

*Note*: The 99% total reflects the inaccuracy of rounding the percentages.

greater tendency to be migrants (61%), compared with the Plungington population as a whole (52%). However, most had travelled in from the immediately adjacent areas: 71% were born within a twenty-mile radius of Preston. This high proportion of short distance migration has been noted by other researchers,[17] and was common to many industrial towns in the nineteenth century. It is possible that the higher percentage of migrants in the shopkeeping sample is a reflection of an older age group, for by 1881 young people would tend to be second generation migrants.

There is, therefore, some truth in the working-class shopkeeper stereotype. Many were migrants, they did tend to be somewhat older than the heads of household in Plungington as a whole, and most of the female shopkeepers were widows or spinsters. However, it should be emphasized that the importance of widows and spinsters within the total sample of all shopkeepers was slight, comprising only 14%. Married males were, by far, the most common, accounting for 71% of the whole.

## III

What attracted these people to shopkeeping? Why should a working-class person, who might be defined as one who is employed as a wage labourer by a 'capitalist', wish to undertake the risk of a capitalist venture himself? These are complex questions. Shopkeeping was not an easy option, for it meant long hours of work, often from early morning to midnight, the profit margins were low, and income uncertain. At the turn of the century, Robert Roberts's parents' shop initially made less than seven shillings profit a week,[18] at a time when most bread-winners were earning upwards of eighteen shillings. Yet, in spite of such hardships, running a shop was a much sought-after dream for many working-class people. It has been argued by Benson[19] that shopkeeping offered to the working man all that was lacking in other working-class jobs, namely comfort, security, independence and status. There can be little doubt that for many, shopkeeping was seen as a means of upward social mobility, yet shopkeeping was taken up by a myriad

of people with many different reasons and aspirations.

It has been possible, by means of careful cross-checking between a range of trade directories and census enumerators' returns between 1860 and 1890[20] (a total sample of 470 shopkeepers), to gain some insight into the factors which may have influenced a person to take up shopkeeping. Using the sources in this way is riddled with difficulties. Shopkeepers can be very evasive for they can change occupation or address with what seems like amazing frequency. At best, therefore, one can only make inferences from the data available.

Benson[21] has distinguished between what he calls full- and part-time 'penny capitalists', between 'the person who, while retaining the other sources of income, wanted to make a little money on the side, and the person who went into business with the expressed intention, at least in the long-term, of attaining independence of wage labour'. The distinction between shopkeeping as a sole income or a supplementary one is an important one when attempting to analyse the reasons for setting up business.

Benson's typical shopkeeper was a middle-aged, skilled male artisan or other worker who had managed to save some money, and who saw shopkeeping as the answer to his mid-life search for independence and freedom from factory discipline.[22] This was particularly feasible in textile towns, such as Preston, where a high percentage of women worked, thus allowing their husbands to take the risk of abandoning wage labour in order to establish a shop. My 1881 sample has already indicted that the majority of shopkeepers were male and over forty years old. However, their reason for entering shopkeeping may not have been a rejection of the factory life, but possibly a case of the factory rejecting them. Many male factory workers were forced to find alternative employment as they grew older, often when they reached forty, owing to failing eyesight and lack of dexterity. That shopkeeping provided a source of employment for these redundant factory workers has been documented elsewhere,[23] and is supported by the current study. Thomas Haworth, aged sixty-nine, was described as a retired cotton printer in the 1881 census, but was listed as a shopkeeper a year later in the Barrett's directory. Similarly, Edward

Chatwin, aged thirty-six, was described as an unemployed cotton cloth looker in the 1881 census, and was also listed in the 1882 Barrett's directory as a shopkeeper; whilst Thomas Barton, aged thirty-one, was a cotton carder in the 1871 census, but had become a shopkeeper according to the Mannex and Barrett's directories of 1873 and 1874 respectively. There seems to be a strong argument in favour of shopkeeping being the domain of unemployed and retired male factory workers. The developing working-class communities certainly offered opportunities for the enterprising ex-factory worker with a little capital to enter shopkeeping. Yet shopkeeping was not only the preserve of redundant factory workers, but of the unemployed generally, and the disabled. Klingender,[24] in his study of small shopkeepers in Hull in 1951, found that 31% of his sample took up shopkeeping for these reasons. The case of the Plungington shopkeeper James Bradley, who was described as paralysed in the 1881 census, supports the view that shopkeeping was suitable employment for the sick and disabled.

Retired people may have been equally attracted to shopkeeping. Examples from the study include Richard Greenhall who was a hatter, aged sixty-one, in the 1871 census but a provision dealer in the following census; William Gradwell, who was described as a retired burial club collector in the 1881 census but listed as a shopkeeper in the Barrett's directory of 1882; and Patrick Roach, who was listed as a 'pensioner' in the Barrett's directory of 1882 but in the same directory three years later was recorded as a shopkeeper. In the days before state pensions, the elderly still needed a means of support, but the employment opportunities were very limited, and mostly confined to unskilled labouring jobs. Shopkeeping, therefore, seemed a better alternative, for it offered independence, possibly a more regular income, and certainly a higher status, whilst the job itself was less physically demanding. William Sharp, an outdoor labourer aged sixty in the 1881 census, clearly took up this option, for he was listed as a shopkeeper a year later in the Barrett's directory.

For younger men shopkeeping was undoubtedly seen as a means of social advancement. Bechofer,[25] in his study of

modern small shopkeepers, identified three main reasons for entering the business, namely, 'being your own boss', 'earning a good living', and 'getting ahead'. Likewise, Klingender[26] found that 63% of his sample gave 'wanting to get on' as their reason for setting up in business. Such reasons would provide an equal incentive to prospective nineteenth-century shopkeepers. Three unskilled labourers in the sample later took up shopkeeping. For example, Thomas Cottam, aged thirty-four, was a railway labourer in the 1881 census but was recorded as a shopkeeper in the Barrett's directory of 1885. Other shopkeepers whose former occupations are known included a lamplighter, a letter-carrier, a railway guard, a nailmaker, a builder, a bricklayer, and a joiner. Some entered shopkeeping via related occupations. There was a fish hawker who eventually set up a fishmonger's shop, a gardener who became a greengrocer, and several agricultural labourers who set up as cowkeepers and later branched out into general shopkeeping.

For some women shopkeeping offered the sole source of income for themselves and their families. For the widows, the abandoned, and the unmarried mother present in the sample, shopkeeping may have represented a means of providing for their families, whilst remaining in the home to look after them. Some widows merely carried on the shopkeeping business already established by their husbands, and it is probable that they already participated in running the shop before. For example, in the 1871 census Ann Entwistle was described as housekeeper, whilst her husband was a provision dealer, but by the following census she was a widow with five children to support, and she was then described as a provision dealer. Other widows appear to have taken up shopkeeping after their husband's death and staked the family's future on its success, as indicated in the sample by Hannah Green, a thirty-nine-year-old widow with three young children, who was recorded as a shopkeeper in the 1881 census. However, for some, shopkeeping may have provided merely a temporary solution to the problem. Mary Charnley, a widow with three children under nine years old, was described as a provision dealer in the 1871 census, but in the following census all three children were working in

the cotton factories, and the widow was then a housekeeper. It seems likely that the children were now able to support her, and there was no need for her to continue shopkeeping.

Few single women were shopkeepers, for the textile industry offered abundant and more lucrative employment. In the 1881 sample only six single women were shopkeepers out of the total of 107. Of these, four were migrants who may not have possessed the necessary skills to be employed in the mills, and the remaining two were over forty and were possibly too old for factory employment. Some single women may have needed to work from the home, in order to look after an elderly relative. For one provision dealer, Grace Archer, family circumstances may have dictated that she worked from home, for the household consisted of her younger sister who was a cotton weaver, her niece and nephew who were still at school, and her eighty-one-year-old father. Keeping a shop would seem an obvious solution to her employment problem. Shopkeeping, therefore, could offer alternative employment to unmarried women who either did not want to or were unable to work in the mills.

Benson[27] has suggested that part-time 'penny capitalism' was essentially a defensive strategy, adopted by working people to cope with poverty. It is difficult to assess the extent to which this type of retailing activity was carried out, for it rarely appears in the census or trade directories, because of its transitory and casual nature. Shopkeeping as a means of supplementing the family income was almost exclusively undertaken by married women, and was frequently seen as the last resort in times of economic adversity, for example, when a husband was unemployed or sick. Many of these 'shops' were set up in the front room or parlour, as a temporary measure, and disappeared when the family's finances improved. Others proved more successful and expanded into permanent parlour shops. However, it is probable that some wives took up shopkeeping to supplement the inadequate wages their husbands were earning. It has been noted by previous researchers[28] that male wages in textile towns were generally lower than elsewhere because of the large numbers of women and children employed, who generated extra income to supplement the family budget. If the women and children did not work, alternative strategies

had to be undertaken to increase the family income. Elizabeth Roberts[29] has observed the phenomenon that wives often left their jobs in the mills after their third child, and shopkeeping could offer alternative and more suitable employment for a wife and mother. The current study supports this view. Alice Rigby, aged twenty-six in the 1871 census, was married but had no children, and was described as a twister. By the following census she had three children and was a grocer. Shopkeeping offered many practical advantages to the wife and mother. It enabled her to work from the home, so that household duties and child-minding could be carried out alongside running the shop.

For some married women with husbands in regular skilled employment, shopkeeping could provide a second rather than a supplementary income. The occupations of husbands where the wife was a shopkeeper in the sample included a house painter, a loomer, a striker in an iron foundry, a roller coverer, a machine minder, and a machine fitter. On the surface these appear to be aspiring two-income families, but in some cases this may be deceptive. Robert Roberts's[30] mother ran a corner shop in Salford, while his father, a skilled mechanic, was often unemployed as a result of his drunkenness and union activity. Shopkeeping may, therefore, have been a defensive strategy against unemployment even for skilled workers.

## IV

The success of these shopkeepers is even more difficult to establish. It can be interpreted in terms of the numbers of multiple shop outlets, and the incidence of family shops passing on to the next generation. In Plungington, neither of these phenomena was common. There were only five examples, out of a total of 470 shopkeepers, of children taking over family shops, and only seven shopkeepers who had more than one outlet. In both cases, it was specialist shopkeepers, for example butchers, who predominated. Success is not only difficult to establish but hard to define. Many of the long-standing shopkeepers may well have had profitable businesses, and could be described as 'success-

ful', but others may have remained through lack of alternative employment without necessarily having any financial success. Similarly, 'failed' shopkeepers may not have become bankrupt, but merely changed occupations, or simply discarded the shop when circumstances altered. The term stability is probably a more accurate description than success when considering working-class shopkeepers.

One method of determining stability is to calculate the rate of turn-over of shopkeepers by using trade directories and the census returns. Hosgood[31] has shown turn-over rates for small shopkeepers in Leicester to be exceedingly high. He calculated that of all general shopkeepers in 1882, only 28% remained a decade later. A similar pattern of turn-over was evident in Plungington.[32] Of the shopkeepers operating in the 1860s only 27% survived a decade later, whilst of those listed in the 1870s, only 22% remained by the 1880s. Over the whole twenty-year period the turn-over was extremely high. Only 8% of the original shopkeepers listed in the 1860s still existed in the 1880s.

Out of the twenty-year sample it has been possible to trace eleven of the shopkeepers who did not survive, and to identify their subsequent occupations. Of these eleven, two became letter-carriers, one a sewing machine agent, one a steel comb-maker, one a book-keeper, one a collector, one a weaver, and four had become other types of retailers: two were drapers, one was a smallware dealer, and the fourth a corn dealer. For the rest one can only speculate, for want of factual evidence, but lack of experience, incompetence, economic depression, too much competition, and a shopkeeper's relationships with his landlord and wholesale supplier were all factors which could affect his chances of survival. For many working-class shopkeepers the balance between success and failure was precarious, and any one of the above factors could tip the balance the wrong way. However, for some, shopkeeping was never intended to be a long-term commitment, but merely a stop-gap measure to cover hard times, and when conditions improved the shop was discarded.

To survive in business in a working-class area depended on more than just good fortune. Thirty-one shopkeepers who survived a minimum of seven years between 1871 and

1882 exhibited particular qualities. Specialist shopkeepers generally had a higher survival rate within their own categories than general shopkeepers. The only fishmonger in the area survived throughout this period, as did 50% of the bakers, in contrast to the 33% of general shopkeepers who survived. Butchers proved the exception, having only a 30% survival rate. This may be explained by the fact that there were a greater number of butchers in the area, compared with other specialist shops, and they were, therefore, open to increased competition. Also the general shopkeeper figures are inflated by the inclusion of grocers, who may have been specialists. If the figures are segregated, the general shopkeepers show only a 28% survival rate and the grocers 47%. Hosgood[33] has rightly argued that specialist shopkeepers tended to have a better survival rate, because they possessed skill, and did not suffer from the great expansion in numbers which the general shopkeeping trade encountered, requiring little skill or capital. With less competition, specialist shopkeepers could enjoy a reasonable amount of success. Nevertheless, general shopkeepers still represented the majority (83%) of the surviving shops. Twelve out of the thirty-one surviving shopkeepers were women, yet they represented only 28% of the original sample. Women, and in particular widows, had a far higher survival rate: 46% compared with 28% for men. This partly explains why women shopkeepers were so often presented as the traditional stereotype. In absolute terms they represented a minority, but they were very long-standing, and as such, were probably seen as an established part of the community. However, the stability of female shopkeepers may have been a reflection of the lack of alternative employment open to them, rather than success in their businesses.

One factor which no doubt contributed to the survival of some shopkeepers was the practice of combining the shop with another occupation. Examples from the study include a brickmaker, a joiner, a stone-mason, a steam sawyer, a blacksmith, a cabinet-maker, and a painter and decorator, all of whom also claimed to be shopkeepers. As the shop merely acted as a support to the main income of the family, it need not make a large profit and would, therefore, have

been more likely to survive. It is probable that it was the wives who ran these shops, although they were under their husbands' names in the sources.

Location was a significant element in determining stability. In Plungington, twenty out of the thirty-one stable shopkeepers were situated on the two main arterial roads running through the area and fourteen were on corner sites (including ten who were on corner sites on the main roads). It should be noted that 63% of the shopkeepers in the sample were sited on these two arterial roads, and in general they had a higher survival rate than shopkeepers on minor roads, 37% compared to 26%. Corner sites were also important to survival, especially for shopkeepers on minor roads, where a 50% survival rate contrasts with 20% for non-corner sites. The evidence from the Plungington sample indicates that shops as sites had a significantly higher survival rate than their keepers. Decennial figures calculated between the 1860s and the 1880s[34] indicate a survival rate of more than 70%, compared with a survival rate of less than 30% for shopkeepers, whilst over the whole twenty-year period the rate was 67%, in stark contrast to the 8% of shopkeepers who survived. However, in spite of the durability of the shops established in the 1860s, they actually represent a very small percentage of the shops founded in the whole period covered by this study. The survival rate of new shops founded after the 1860s is interesting. Whereas those established in the 1870s show a high survival rate (61%) to 1889, very few (25%) of the shops founded in the early 1880s were still operating at that date. There may be several explanations for this. It seems possible that there were too many shops competing in the area in the 1880s, with supply of shops outstripping demand. Plungington was easily able to absorb the great expansion of shops in the earlier decades, as it was a developing community, but as the area matured, there was not the need for further shops, as those already established had cornered the market. It could also be that all the prime sites, such as corners, had already been taken and other sites proved less profitable.

Another factor which may have contributed to the low survival rate of shops at this time was competition from the co-operative stores. Although these had begun to invade the

area in the 1870s, with a branch opening at Adelphi Street on the periphery of Plungington in 1873, and a further one in Brackenbury Street in Plungington itself in 1875, the co-operatives were slow to take off in Preston and it was only in the 1880s that 'the co-operative principle made headway in the town'. Membership of the co-operatives rose in Preston from 1,807 in 1880 to 5,992 in 1890.[35] The increased competition from the co-operatives could threaten the livelihood of many small shopkeepers, for the co-operatives with their cash-only policy often took a shopkeeper's most creditworthy customers, leaving them with the less financially secure with whom they could take no risks.

The 1880s was a period of economic depression in Britain and it is possible that the low survival rate of shops may be attributed to it. Working-class shops operated on the margins of existence. Their businesses depended on the wealth of the immediate community and any downward trend in the economy could spell disaster to the retail trade.

## V

The information obtained in this study confirms many widely held beliefs about working-class shopkeepers. Shopkeepers were an integral part of the working-class community, but they were by no means an homogeneous group. They formed a mixed collection of people whose diverse circumstances led them into the retailing business with varying degrees of success or failure. Nevertheless, this study has shown that the shopkeepers of Plungington possessed certain characteristics which distinguished them from the general population of the area, and which substantially supports the traditional stereotype of the small shopkeeper. That they tended to be older than the general population and that many were migrants is not in question. What is debatable is the role of women in shopkeeping. Female shopkeepers feature largely in contemporary accounts, but the vast majority of shopkeepers, according to the sample, were men. This can only be reconciled by stressing the point that women were under-represented in the sources because some were listed under their husbands'

names, whilst others may have had shops too small to be included in a directory. Thus, the true numbers of women involved in shopkeeping have been obscured, though probably not to any great extent.

It is apparent from the study that shopkeeping could have appealed to a variety of working-class people at different times in their lives and for different reasons. For the redundant factory worker and the unskilled migrant, shopkeeping offered better 'prospects' than labouring jobs, both financially and socially. For others it offered freedom from factory discipline and the possibility of financial betterment. Shopkeeping also provided suitable employment for women because it allowed them to earn an income whilst not neglecting their household responsibilities. The popular view that people entered business for social advancement is not so evident in working-class shopkeepers in the nineteenth century. The younger unskilled labourers may have had such reasons in mind, but they account for a small minority of the sample. Most people probably took up shopkeeping as a last resort, through lack of other opportunities, or as a stop-gap measure in times of hardship.

The high failure statistics are, therefore, hardly surprising. Shopkeepers were of a transitory nature; 46% in the sample were only listed once and in only one source. It is probable that many never appeared in the sources at all, either because they were too small, or they had ceased to exist before they could be listed. This would be particularly true in the case of parlour shops. Yet a few did survive for long periods. Location was all-important to survival, but other factors such as reduced competition through specialization, dual occupations, or simply lack of alternatives could also play a part. In contrast to the shopkeepers, the shop sites had a good survival rate, at least those established early on in the development of the Plungington community. It was the shopkeepers who came and went.

## NOTES

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