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**Men, Women, Shops and "Little, Shiny Homes":**

**The Consuming of Coventry,**

**1930 - 1939.**

**Lesley Karen Whitworth**

**Submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

**in the Centre for Social History,**

**University of Warwick.**

**September 1997**

**This dissertation may be photocopied.**

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### *Declaration*

In compliance with the University regulations requiring declaration of any material previously submitted for a lower degree, I hereby state that parts of the oral testimony ascribed to Mrs W and Mrs Ru within the body of the thesis were originally presented in a final year dissertation for the BA (Hons) History of Design course at Brighton Polytechnic in 1988.

All research has been undertaken in accordance with University safety policy.

## Summary

In the 1930s many people leaving the United Kingdom's depressed areas in search of work were drawn to Coventry. Companies involved in the manufacture of motor cars, electrical goods, artificial silk and machine tools were typical of those located in the city. Most incomers found work: unemployment remained at a low level whilst the city's population exploded. The city boundaries were extended, and Coventry was rapidly suburbanised in response to the heightened demand for accommodation. Private developers noted with surprise how few of the new houses were built to let. The 1936 edition of Home Market placed Coventry first on its national index of purchasing power. From the middle of the decade, the city was closely associated with rearmament and four shadow factories provided further employment opportunities.

This research addresses changes in the processes and practices of (primarily non-food) shopping amongst prosperous working-class Coventry people in the 1930s. It assesses the development of new spending patterns in relation to new products and services, and examines the role played by gender in determining the who, what, when, where and why of shopping. The thesis asks how these men and women negotiated financial power and consumer choice between them, and discovers that the families who benefitted most from new material opportunities were those which placed a value on 'togetherness'.

A range of source material is utilised to interrogate and contextualise oral testimony, and to explore the development of local retail provision. A relationship is established between the city's manufacturing, retail and domestic environments. The research suggests that men spent slightly more time in the home, and women slightly less during this period. It also asserts that going shopping was not necessarily about acquiring goods; that acquiring goods did not necessarily involve going to the shops; and that the shopper was not always a woman.



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*INTRODUCTION*

*An absence of joy, and other  
absences*

### *An absence of joy*

Over the past thirty-five years historians have comprehensively revised their view of the nineteen thirties, acknowledging the paradox that alongside mass unemployment, the contraction of staple industries and the decay of geographically discrete areas of Britain, there was also economic growth, industrial renewal and an improved standard of living for many. Wage rate gains made during and after the 1914-18 war held up well for those in work during the Slump, whilst the cost of living index fell by approximately one third between 1920 and 1939. This combination of factors generated a rise in real income per head of about one third over the inter-war period as a whole, with the 1930s providing the major share. At the same time, gradual improvements in welfare provision since 1906 meant that the impact of three of the four major threats to working-class economic stability had been significantly reduced. Unemployment, ill-health and old age no longer posed quite the same threat they once had. The generation who married and set up home in the 1930s were among the first to enjoy a reduction in the financial and emotional burden of caring for elderly parents. It would be difficult to estimate the improvement in quality of life related to this change alone. To crown it all, a reduced working week freed more hours in which to deploy surplus income, where these hours were not further eroded by overtime.

Economic historians have recognised the importance of these developments. D.H. Aldcroft, for instance, wrote of the period:

Expenditure patterns and budgetary surveys suggest that many families enjoyed a considerable improvement in their standard of living ... This was certainly true of most middle-class households but many working-class families also shared in the improvement.'

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standards of comfort and welfare of working-class families, particularly those in which the wage earners were in regular employment'.<sup>2</sup> Yet in the classic social histories of working-class life in the period between the First and Second World Wars, these families, and these 'appreciable rises in standards of comfort' are nowhere to be found. There are precious few signs of the positive and enthusiastic response one might expect to this change in circumstances. Nowhere does the task of shopping appear to be liberated from the exigencies of need and undertaken with joy.

In fact, neither do histories of middle-class life at this time provide us with accounts of joyous, celebratory shopping experiences. In his pivotal series of 1983 articles examining class in relation to culture, Raphael Samuel paints a vivid picture of middle-class existence as hemmed in by concerns about status and the tyranny of petty distinctions, wherein few economic latitudes were commonly enjoyed.<sup>3</sup> He cites a poem by Anna Wickham as an exemplar of the frustrations experienced by middle-class women, particularly suburban women, in which frugality and a lack of agency with regard to material things are clearly defined:

But every man of the Croydon class  
Lives in terror of joy and speech,  
'Words are betrayers''joys are brief'  
The maxims their wise ones teach  
And for all my labour of love and life  
I shall be clothed and fed  
And they'll give me an orderly funeral  
When I'm still enough to be dead<sup>4</sup>

He goes on to speculate that

it would be rewarding to inquire into ... the ways in which the middle-class used shopping as a surrogate for domestic service, with the 'fitting' at the milliner's or the tailor's, as a recog-

niton of personal worth; the gracious manner extended to the milkman or the 'daily' as a way of confirming a ladylike social distance; or the transactions with the family butcher, or the grocer, as a mode of receiving respect.<sup>5</sup>

But if Clementina Black's account of 1918 is to be trusted, those very surrogate pleasures identified by Samuel were already under threat in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. In her view

Middle-class women, who mostly do the shopping for their households, and some of whom used to like doing so, are finding the task more and more distasteful, and have come deeply to resent being treated in their character of purchasers as supplicants for favours that may be granted or withheld at will. Their impatience of the recurring rudeness that has become almost systematic is preparing them to accept any method of buying that will save them from the necessity of personally visiting shops.<sup>6</sup>

One *fictional* account of shopping behaviour set in a middle-class milieu, alerts us to the intense emotional investment it was possible to make in the act(s) of buying: Jan Struther's Mrs. Miniver averred a genuine passion for shopping and felt that 'To do it cold-bloodedly, in a half-empty shop, without difficulty or competition, [was] as joyless as a *marriage de convenance*'.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, middle-class women in the mould of Mrs. Miniver, seem likely to have been in a minority. And as Alison Light tartly points out in her discussion of Struther's authorial artifices, 'We never hear her ordering the mutton'.<sup>8</sup>

This absence of joy is even more evident in existing accounts of working-class life. Far more familiar to us from the social commentaries and literature of the time are images of passive, impotent, impoverished and desperate working-class consumers: Mrs. Hardcastle's shamefaced acceptance of Mrs. Nettle's club cheque in Walter Greenwood's Love on the

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Dole; the thousands recorded by Rowntree thronging Woolworths in York on a Saturday merely to gaze at the goods on display, without expectation of purchasing; or the supplicants for ever smaller quantities of food in Robert Roberts's father's corner shop.<sup>9</sup>

To give an example of the partial treatment to which the period has been subjected, and one which has particular relevance for the Thirties, we might compare John Burnett's statement that by the 1930s 'a regular salary or wage of £200 a year was widely regarded as adequate security for a mortgage ... well within the reach of engineers, fitters, printers, engine-drivers and other skilled workers', with F.M.L. Thompson's assertion that 'the concentration of the high ratings [of owner-occupation] in the boom towns of the period ... suggests the strongly middle-class character of the surge in owner-occupation'.<sup>10</sup> Literature on the growth and development of home-ownership in the inter-war years regularly conflates suburbia with middle-class, rendering working-class residents invisible. Despite a qualifying sentence early on, to the effect that working-class residents existed, the 'London Suburban Man' described by Alan Jackson in Semi-Detached London displays resolutely middle-class characteristics.<sup>11</sup> Aided by the likes of the Grossmiths' Mr. Pooter, we feel a sense of acquaintanceship which leads us to believe (mistakenly) that we know what it was to be a suburban.<sup>12</sup>

The attention given to issues of deprivation in the many social surveys of the period is understandable, given that for instance, half the population were believed to be incapable of keeping themselves in an optimum state of physical efficiency.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the long tradition of philanthropic commentary on working-class spending habits had generated its own genre of gloomy, if well-meaning, prognostications on the subject. These provide their own imagery of stunted consumerism such as Maud Pember Reeves's respondent, shopping after dark in slippared feet because



her husband's belief that women need never leave the house meant that she had no boots; or the seventy-two distinct and tiny purchases of tea made in a seven week period by a family recorded by J.A. Hobson.<sup>14</sup>

There is no heritage of literature which accurately reflects the experience of confident, assertive, pro-active working-class consumers in the pre-Second World War period. Even the robust vitality of the markets - a stock feature in accounts of working-class culture in the nineteenth century - is compromised because, of course, it was the place where old stock could be had for very little at the close of the week's business. The long historical sweep of Paul Johnson's Saving and Spending: The Working Class Economy in Britain, 1870-1939 privileges continuity of working-class experience over disjuncture, and could perhaps with greater accuracy have been called 'Saving and Lending', as he himself comes close to acknowledging in the book's opening pages.<sup>15</sup> His account is also virtually silent on the subject of gender. However, it does commend itself as a text which allows the veracity of a working class riven by questions of rank and social standing to the same extent as the middle classes captured by Raphael Samuel. Johnson states that

The aim of most households was not just to balance income and expenditure to make ends meet, but to do so in a way that brought, various social benefits in an intensely competitive world in which position or status had constantly to be reasserted.<sup>16</sup>

An important exception to this generalised statement of omission is to be found in recent work by Sally Alexander, Cheryl Buckley, Andrew Davies, and D. Fowler. These historians examine the experience of young, working-class consumers of the period, who were able to benefit from reasonable wages in the interim between leaving school and setting up their own homes.<sup>17</sup> In addition, glimpses of a changing relation to material things amongst working people may be found in Joanna Bourke's

Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960, in which men as well as women are engaged in domestic production and are desirous of 'a good house and a bit of garden'.<sup>19</sup> This is important because despite the wealth of detail now available to historians on masculine working practices, conditions, rates of pay and employee/employer relations, we know very little in specific terms about the uses to which wages were put beyond the traditionally ascribed arenas of pub, bookie and sportsground. Arguably we know even less about men's consumption than about women's.

While young working-class consumers of the period have to some extent been rescued from obscurity, the experience of their older, more settled and domesticated siblings remains largely obscured. The likes of the fondly told and effortlessly remembered occasion on which two of the respondents in this study jointly made the decision to purchase an item for their first home together is nowhere represented. It is a primary consideration of this investigation to make occasions like this visible; to analyse the interactions between husbands and wives; and to determine where, and with whom, the processes of shopping began and ended.<sup>19</sup> It represents a celebration, and a subjection to scrutiny, of behaviour frequently considered too trivial to warrant closer attention.

### *An absence of "shopping"*

Over the past decade there has been an enormous growth of interest in consumption among economists, economic historians, sociologists, social anthropologists and belatedly, social historians. Yet comparatively little has so far been written about the processes and practices of shopping. John Benson has written cogently on this extraordinary circumstance in which shopping, the 'most important' of the 'mechanisms by which supply and demand [are] brought into contact with one another', has received such scant attention:

For even those scholars who have shown some interest in consumption have tended to concentrate their attention more upon ownership and usage than upon selection and purchase - while even those scholars who have shown some interest in selection and purchase have tended to concentrate their attention more upon marketing and retailing than upon spending and shopping.<sup>20</sup>

The escalation of interest in all aspects of consumption has been poorly reflected in recently published socio-historical surveys. Both Trends in British Society Since 1900, first published in 1972, and Volume II of the Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950: People and Their Environment, published nearly two decades later, have a chapter on leisure.<sup>21</sup> The former boasts a section on 'Shopping and Leisure' within a chapter on 'Urbanization and Local Government' by Bruce Woods, alongside A.H. Halsey's rather more conventionally focused chapter (cinema, sport, reading, youth clubs and adult education). Despite the passage of time, and the emergence of new avenues of historical enquiry, there are if anything fewer shops in evidence in the more recent book; a circumstance which serves only to expose a conceptual difficulty. Whereas leisure is commonly talked about in terms of the increased consumption of commercially provided facilities (leisure equals consumption), there appears to be no comparable recognition that consumption (in its wider sense) equals leisure.<sup>22</sup> Woods's linkage of shopping with leisure was historiographically far-sighted.

A book devoted to leisure in the inter-war period, Stephen G Jones's Workers At Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure, 1919-1939 (1986) fares no better, and arguably reflects the masculine preoccupation with production, politics, power and the public sphere identified by James Obelkevich as a reason why consumption has taken so long to attract critical attention.<sup>23</sup> His own chapter on consumption in Understanding

Post-War British Society is, however, marred by questionable periodisation, sweeping generalisations about gender, and factual inaccuracy.<sup>24</sup> His assertion that the 1930s meant *only* 'hardship for millions' (a premise it will be the work of this thesis to refute) contrasts sharply with a conceptualisation of the 1950s as a time when 'What previously had been luxuries for the rich - cars, refrigerators, televisions, overseas holidays - now were enjoyed by the majority of the population'. From nothing to abundance in twenty years!

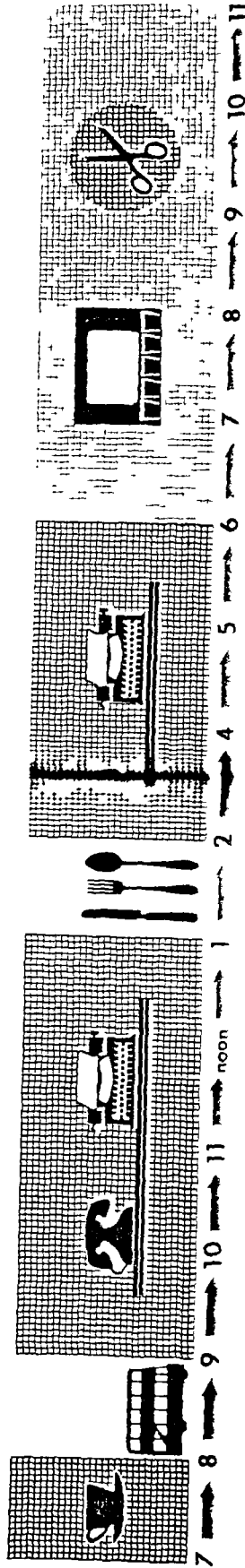
Over the last two decades, the drive to uncover women's history, especially working-class women's history, has provided many useful insights into women's budgeting practices as an aspect of their involvement in the reproduction of everyday life within the home; but shopping habits per se have seldom been the focus for analysis. Existing accounts of working-class women's lives present a contradictory and impossibly fragmented view of women as shoppers. 'Heroic' portrayals of women who successfully kept their families fed and clothed by a combination of stealth and steely determination exist alongside images of women 'harassed to buy ... and harassed to pay', sometimes within the same text, as is the case in a piece from 1986 by Pat Ayers and Jan Lambertz.<sup>25</sup> Women are represented as both 'a power to be reckoned with in their own homes' and the helpless dupes of wiley department store entrepreneurs.<sup>26</sup>

We might expect this deficiency to be remedied in histories of housework and household technologies, but here the emphasis is typically on the impact of machinery on domestic routines within the home. In this treatment, new products are acquired and assimilated without anyone ever having made the decision to buy them.<sup>27</sup>

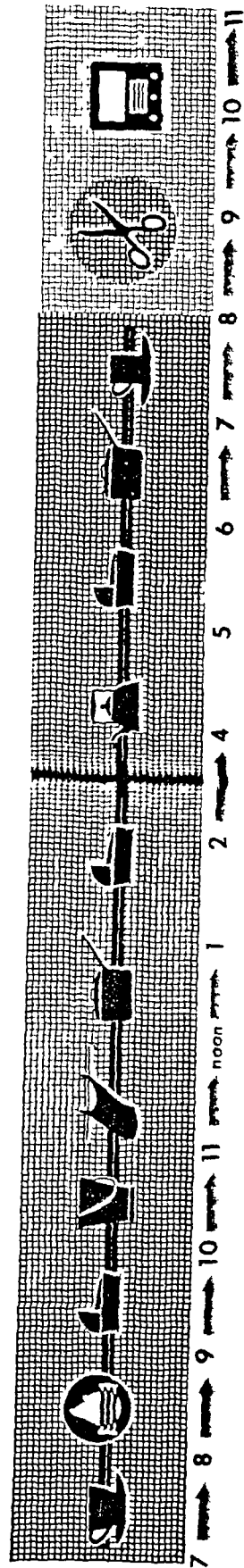
Both literally and conceptually, shopping occupies an indistinct space in women's own accounts of their timetables. It plays no part in the graph which depicts 'The Working Woman's Day', prepared by the Isotype

# The Working Woman's Day

Clerical Worker



Housewife and Mother



Institute for Charlotte Luetken's 1946 publication Women and A New Society (adjacent)<sup>28</sup>. This was despite the fact that many women continued to shop on a daily basis during this period. Its centrality to the daily round is also obscured in the findings of the Women's Health Enquiry Committee of the 1930s which recorded that sixty-five per cent of their respondents had two hours of "leisure" per day which was spent in 'shopping, taking the baby out, mending, sewing and doing household jobs of an irregular kind which cannot be fitted into "working hours"'.<sup>29</sup> A further example may be found in the tables of leisure time activities produced by B. Seebohm Rowntree in Poverty and Progress, his second social survey of York. Here Rowntree was forced to point out that although his married female respondents had been asked to describe how they spent their leisure, 'a few', in fact the majority, 'have told how they spent their whole days'. The research team made no attempt at analysis of the data thus presented, and it is doubtful whether the women themselves could have been any more helpful. So the entries stand: 'Household duties. Rest, read, sew, go shopping, listen to wireless', 'Wash children. Make weekly payments to insurance man, coal man, clothier, laundry man. Pay shop bill. Get groceries in for week-end on credit. After dinner visit mother-in-law with husband'. All of this is testimony to the increasingly domestic focus of many women's work and leisure activities in the inter-war period and the immense awkwardness of distilling one out from the other.<sup>30</sup> Rowntree's tables are reproduced as an appendix within this thesis, because of the unique insight they offer into men's and women's versions of 1930s working-class domestic routine.

The fact remains then, that despite, or perhaps because of, the ever closer identification of the terms 'woman' and 'shopper' in the post-war period, women's histories to date have been no more likely to address this aspect of consumption directly than labour historians have done, so

occluded has the subject become by sex, God, and socialism.

*Location, sources and methodology*

The privileging of production over consumption, men's history over women's, and work over leisure in the historiography of industrial society has resulted in a tardy response to the needful study of consumption and of the pivotal part played by shopping within it. In the preceding two sections we have seen that shopping, particularly shopping which breaks free of survival stratagems, has been peculiarly absent from discussions of both work, and leisure, in explorations of working-class culture prior to the Second World War. Remedying this "absence" has proved a difficult project to undertake partly because of the conceptualisation of consumption as a capitalist and/or patriarchal device by historians of the left. As Joanna Bourke argues in Working-Class Cultures, designating the home (arguably the major focus for working-class women's consumption) as a site solely for women's exploitation is to deny a whole other dimension of meaning: the home's emotional resonance and symbolic signification of wellbeing. Nevertheless, the fact that shopping often takes place away from the home and occupies a contested space between work and pleasure has undoubtedly contributed to its neglect by historians of women.

We might also benefit from a clearer definition of the term shopping. What does it encompass? Clearly the moments taken to carry out the financial transaction in a retail establishment only constitute a part of the process. Decisions to buy particular items, or distinct versions of particular items usually pre-date the journey which culminates in their acquisition. The shopping list is the most commonplace proof of this fact. More expensive items are even less likely to be bought spontaneously unless an individual or family unit has access to generous amounts of capital. Within this study, shopping is defined as any action leading up

to a decision to acquire a given item, which may or may not involve cash payment or shops per se. Potentially this spans a whole spectrum of activity from window shopping to day-dreaming, from competition entry to petty theft, although the emphasis within this work is on lawful acquisition.

Three social historians have recently expressed frustration with the limitations of current approaches to a study of shopping/consumption. James Obelkevich has pleaded for a rejection of 'grand theories of consumption' and the pursuit of 'detailed empirical research on a particular product or a particular group of consumers'.<sup>31</sup> John Benson has warned against the simplistic assumption that retailing activity evolves everywhere in broadly the same way, without reference to local market conditions.<sup>32</sup> Bill Lancaster in his recent study of the department store produces a trenchant critique of highly theorised approaches, many of which appear to reflect some aspect of 'the truth', but none of which have all the answers.<sup>33</sup>

This thesis therefore seeks to operate within some of the spaces identified in the foregoing discussion. It is an empirical study of the relationship between a defined group of working people in the city of Coventry during the decade 1930 to 1939. There were good reasons for choosing Coventry as the location for the study. The city is frequently cited as one of those places most redolent of the spirit of industrial renewal associated with the period. Thus Peter Mathias writes that 'So much depends on whether the spotlight is turned upon Jarrow or Slough; on Merthyr Tydfil or on Oxford; on Greenock and Birkenhead or on Coventry, Weston-super-Mare and the environs of London'.<sup>35</sup>

In addition, there seemed ample justification for choosing a site in the Midlands when so many discussion of the nation's economic state, and so many accounts of working-class culture are now, and have historically



been, polarised around the north/south divide identified by Mrs Barton in 1855.<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, given the primacy attributed to department stores as educators of consumers, the fact that the city did not gain its first department store until late 1937 added to its curiosity value. Many of the new kinds of consumer goods were being manufactured in the city in the period, and a large part of the population migrated there to seek employment in manufacturing industries.

This thesis attempts to situate these people, both men and women, within a dense, multi-layered material reality and deduce their responses to the new economic opportunities available to them. The 'consuming' in the title is intended to suggest the purchasing decisions and shopping habits adopted by Coventrians, as well as their interaction with the city's built environments, both retail and residential. The 'Little, shiny homes' referred to by one of the respondents, emerged in the study as crucial touchstones for the economic and emotional wellbeing of their occupants.<sup>37</sup> The study focuses on the early years of marriage and the courtship immediately preceeding them, so that the equipping of a home provides a particularly concentrated episode of goods acquisition. Although it is hoped that the material presented here will be of interest to scholars in related disciplines concerned with issues of class, taste, lifestyle and embourgeoisement, these questions are not directly dealt with here.

In the piece on 'Shopping and Leisure' by Bruce Wood previously mentioned, the author dismissed the pre-Second World War period in the following way: 'Information on shopping, leisure and entertainment habits is not available for the early part of the century ... Statistical evidence of historical trends cannot, therefore, be presented.'<sup>38</sup> Whilst this presents an unnecessarily bleak picture, it is nevertheless true that difficulties over sources have contributed to the marginalisation of studies of consumption. The absence of a Census of Distribution before

1950 means there is no ready-made digest of retailing developments during this period. James B Jefferys's Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950 goes a long way towards remedying this deficiency, but it is a history resolutely without shopping protagonists.<sup>39</sup> Within this thesis a wide variety of sources have been drawn upon to reinstate both the subject of shopping, and the shopping subject. These include local newspapers, street directories, bus timetables, works' magazines, parish newsletters, apprenticeship records, shopworkers' union minutes, school inspection reports, photographs, the journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, the findings of the 1949 'Coventry Sociological Survey', autobiographical writings and oral testimony from a variety of sources, including material generated in a series of interviews carried out by me with local residents.<sup>40</sup>

The emphatically working-class character of Coventry is discussed in the following chapter. My own approach to definitions of respondents' class identity is a pragmatic one following the example set by Joanne Bourke.<sup>41</sup> For many of the people whose words she reproduces, class was about things: things owned and not owned. Her argument echoes the view expressed by Robert Roberts:

The class struggle, as manual workers in general knew it, was apolitical and had place entirely within their own society. They looked upon it not in any way as a war against the employers but as a perpetual series of engagements in the battle of life itself.<sup>42</sup>

## *Footnotes to Introduction*

All places of publication are London unless otherwise stated.

1. D.H. Aldcroft, The Inter-War Economy: Britain 1919-1939 (1970), p.367.
2. S. Pollard, The Development of the British Economy: 1914-1967 (1973), p.293.
3. R. Samuel, 'The Middle Class Between the Wars, Part III: Suburbs Under Siege', New Socialist (May/June 1983), p.28.
4. Samuel, 'Suburbs Under Siege', New Socialist (May/June 1983), p.30.
5. Samuel, 'The Middle Class Between the Wars, Part II', New Socialist, (March/April 1983), p.31.
6. C. Black, A New Way of Housekeeping (1918), p.45.
7. J. Struther, Mrs Miniver, p.15; cited in A. Light, Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars (1991), p.141.
8. Light, Forever England p.141.
9. W. Greenwood, Love On The Dole 1933 (1966), pp.110-111; B. Seebohm Rowntree, Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York (1941), pp.218-219; and R. Roberts, The Classic Slum (1971), p.105.
10. J. Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (1978), p.246; and F.M.L. Thompson, 'Town and City' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed), The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950. Volume I: Regions and Communities (Cambridge, 1990), pp.82-83.
11. See A. A. Jackson, Semi-Detached London (1973), Chapter 10.
12. G. and W. Grossmith, Diary of a Nobody (Harmondsworth, 1977).
13. J. B. Orr found in his investigation on Food, Health and Income (1936) that 'a state of well-being such that no improvement can be affected by a change in the diet' was only attainable at an income level above that of fifty per cent of the population. Cited in J. Burnett, Plenty and Want (1979), pp.301-302.

14. M. Pember Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week (1981) pp.163-64; J. A. Hobson, Problems of Poverty (ND), cited in Burnett, Plenty and Want p.167.
15. P. Johnson, Saving and Spending: The Working Class Economy in Britain, 1870-1939 (Oxford, 1985), p.3.
16. Johnson, Saving and Spending, p.5.
17. See S. Alexander, 'Becoming a woman in London in the 1920s and 1930s' in D. Feldman and G. Stedman Jones (eds), Metropolis. London: Histories and Representations Since 1800 (1989); C. Buckley, seminar paper, 'Modernity, Femininity and Regional Identity: Women and Fashion in North-East England Between the Wars' (V&A, 18.5.95); A. Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939 (Buckingham, 1992); D. Fowler, 'Teenage Consumers? Young Wage-Earners and Leisure in Manchester, 1919-1939', in A. Davies and S. Fielding (eds), Workers' Worlds: Cultures and Communities in Manchester and Salford, 1880-1939 (Manchester, 1992).
18. J. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960: Gender, Class and Ethnicity (1994), p.98.
19. Transcript of interview with Mr and Mrs B.
20. J. Benson, The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980 (1994), p.59. M. Douglas and B. Isherwood, The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption (1979) is a good example of the former approach; whilst B. Lancaster, The Department Store: A Social History (1995) is the most recent example of the latter.
21. See A.H. Halsey (ed), Trends in British Society Since 1900: A Guide to the Changing Social Structure of Britain (1972); and F.M.L. Thompson (ed), The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950. Volume 2: People and Their Environment (Cambridge, 1990).
22. H. Cunningham, 'Leisure and Culture' in F.M.L. Thompson (ed), The Cambridge Social History of Britain, 1750-1950. Volume 2: People and Their

Environment (Cambridge, 1990), pp.305-306.

23. See S. G. Jones, Workers At Play: A Social and Economic History of Leisure, 1919-1939 (1986) and J. Obelkevich, 'Consumption' in J.Obelkevich and P. Catterall (eds), Understanding Post-War British Society (1994), p.142.

24. Obelkevich, 'Consumption' in Obelkevich and Catterall (eds), Understanding Post-War British Society (1994), pp.141-154. Obelkevich states, for example, that at the end of the Second World War many families still did not own a radio (p.146), despite overwhelming evidence that radio sets were by that date ubiquitous.

25. See P. Ayers and J. Lambertz, 'Marriage Relations, Money, and Domestic Violence in Working-Class Liverpool, 1919-39' in J. Lewis (ed), Labour and Love: Women's experience of Home and Family, 1850-1940 (1986), p.205.

26. A. Phillips, Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class (1987), pp.56-57. For discussions of women's relationship with department stores see Lancaster, Department Store and R. Bowlby, Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola (1985).

27. See C. Davidson, A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles, 1650-1950 (1982); C. Hardyment, From Mangle to Microwave: The Mechanization of Household Work (Cambridge, 1988); and E. Lupton, Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines from Home to Office (New York, 1993).

28. C. Luetkens, Women and A New Society (1946), pp.104-105.

29. M. Spring Rice, Working-Class Wives: Their Health and Conditions (1981), p.108.

30. Rowntree, Poverty and Progress p.428, p.430 and p.441.

31. Obelkevich, 'Consumption' in Obelkevich and Catterall (eds), Understanding Post-War British Society p.142.

32. See J. Benson, 'Retailing on Two Continents: Newcastle, New South

33. See Lancaster, Department Store, Chapter 9.
  34. Phillips, Divided Loyalties p.59.
  35. P. Matthias cited in J. Stevenson and C. Cook, The Slump (1977), pp.8-9.
  36. Mrs. Gaskell, North and South (1855).
  37. Transcript of interview with Mrs. N.
  38. B. Wood, 'Urbanization and Local Government' in A.H. Halsey (ed), Trends in British Society Since 1900 (1972), p.261.
  39. J. B. Jefferys, Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950 (Cambridge, 1954).
  40. The findings of the Coventry Sociological Survey were presented to the Planning Department of the City of Coventry in 1951. Research was carried out by a team from the University of Birmingham under the leadership of Professor P. Sargent Florence and began in 1949. The findings are unpublished in their original form, although excerpts may be found in L. Kuper's contribution to the edited collection Living in Towns (1953).
- See Chapter 3 for biographical details of respondents interviewed as part of the research for this thesis.
41. The literature on definitions of class by historians, economists and sociologists is vast and conflicting. In Working-Class Cultures, Joanna Bourke describes some of the difficulties in applying such definitions (see especially pp.1-4). Recent debates on class and class consciousness may be found in J. Benson, The Working Class in Britain, 1850-1939 (1989), and R. McKibbin, The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain 1880-1950 (Oxford, 1990).
  42. Roberts, Classic Slum p.28.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
***Introducing 1930s Coventry***

### *Local economy*

In 1931, in the early part of the period covered by this study and in the depths of a national depression, Coventry possessed enough confidence, self belief and faith in technological progress to publish the whimsical article reproduced overleaf in its annual carnival programme. In the 'Carnival of 2031' a futuristic world encompassing personal transportation, robots and aerial police (kindly ones), is envisaged in which the city has continued to play a leading world role. Because 'The last word in modernity had been touched the previous year when the Ballet of the Moon Maidens (televised) had proved an unbounded success ... it was proposed to repeat as nearly as possible the Carnival of a hundred years previously'. At the end of the account, the day-long entertainment prompts one citizen of 2031 to conclude, "Pink radio sparks! Those 1931 galoots knew how to enjoy themselves".<sup>1</sup>

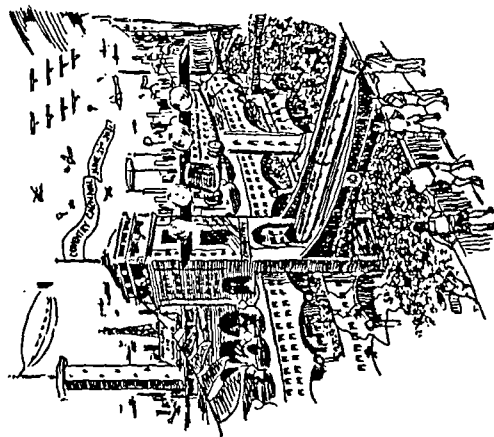
By the late 1930s the city of Coventry could boast an intriguing set of economic indicators. For example:

- i. it was the country's fastest growing industrial centre <sup>2</sup>
- ii. between 1921 and 1937 its population had risen at a rate seven times that of the country as a whole<sup>3</sup>
- iii. between 1933 and 1938 the percentage of unemployment in the city was generally half the national average <sup>4</sup>
- iv. it had the fastest rate of growth in housebuilding and the highest rates of working class owner occupation for a town of its size <sup>5</sup>
- v. by 1938 car ownership rates were at double the national average <sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon of the city's prosperity received wide contemporary coverage. The Times of 10 February 1934 described the activities of 'new industries in an ancient city' and noted the lowest percentage of unemployment in any industrial borough of similar or larger size in the country and the lowest monthly ratio of persons in receipt of poor relief



# CARNIVAL OF 2031



**C**ARNIVAL Day of 2031 dawned fine. There was not even a cirrus cloud in the blue panoply of the heavens. This occasioned no surprise. A rainless day had been guaranteed by the Weather Control Board at Greenwich and an approaching low-pressure zone transferred to Manchester where a few gallons of soft water more or less didn't matter anyhow.

The Carnival had boomed throughout the world. Excursions had been arranged from places as far removed as Medicine Hat, Igarape-Tyua, Ikula-ya-Wamba and Palazolo Acreide. At the last moment a revolution in Spain prevented attendance of the President as his presence was required at his own funeral.

This Carnival was to be run along entirely novel lines. The last word in modernity had been touched the previous year when the Ballet of the Moon Maidens (televised) had proved an unbounded success. Now it was proposed to repeat as neatly as possible the Carnival of a hundred years previously, namely, 1931.

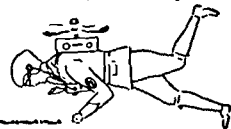
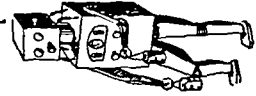
The project had gripped the imagination of the world and even the Home Secretary had added his quota of praise, pointing out that the Carnival was a healthy counter-blast to sweepstakes which were now legalised in every country in the world save England and Polynesia.

From an early hour the sky was studied by the great air liners which flashed over the skyline from every point of the compass, making their landing either on the great air terminals at Whitley or on the roofs of suitably equipped buildings.

Suddenly the Chairman of the Carnival Committee noticed that one air liner had not descended but was hovering over the park. Bringing his telescope to bear he realised that it was occupied by Aberdonians.

"Hi!" he shouted to the General Secretary, "they're stopping up there to miss the collection. Blot 'em out."

At a sign from the General Secretary, an airplane shot heavenwards. There was a hiss and the Aberdonians found themselves engaged in a thick black cloud of smoke flavoured by the addition of sulphurated hydrogen.



Came the hoarse screech of bagpipes in agony and that air liner shot out of the cloud and landed with the celerity of a Coventrian invited into the Queen's for a drink. Meanwhile the streets were thronged by a jostling crowd of Parthians and Medes and Elamites, Cretes and Arabians, Patagonian fishmen and Yugoslavians—to mention but a few. Every vantage point on the soaring sky-scrubbers was black with spectators and they were joined every minute by late-comers who floated down from the air 'buses by parachutes.

Suddenly a yell of unrestrained laughter rent the air. Dressed in the everyday attire of 1931, the procession marshalls had appeared.

"My maternal parent," lisped a tender child of six, "what are those encumbrances upon their legs?"

"Why, those must be trousers," replied Mother, with a hasty glance at her programme.

"Why did they wear trousers?" demanded the child.

"I suppose it was considered the thing to do," was the answer.

"I think Father's toga looks far nicer," proclaimed the infant.

Then abruptly, the eyes of the spectators almost bulged out of their heads. A prominent Elamite was so startled that he fell off a window ledge twenty stories up and was only saved from a squashy death by a constable of the aerial police who deftly caught him in the sidecar of his aero-cycle.

There was a rustle of a multitude of programmes and grammes and then the crowd, with one accord, shouted "It's a horse!"

For, alack, the world had become so mechanised that practically the only horses remaining were the equine portions of statues.

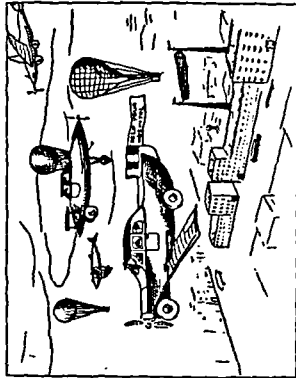
The appearance of the motor cars of 1931 evoked a tremendous outburst of merriment. One backfired and every Burgess of Chicago threw up their hands, so much was instinct ingrained in the bone.

And now the procession proper was passing by. Their automatically propelled wings gleaming in the sunshine. The collectors darted from house-top to house-top, from window to window, accumulating masses of the international notes then in circulation.

The decorated bicycles sent a shudder of astonishment through the assembly. The idea of propelling two wheels by the feet was so entirely novel to this wing-flapping age. Thunders of applause greeted the tableaux: the fire engine of 1931, which had been unearthed under Pool Meadow during excavations for the aerial fire-lighting station, proved to be an exceedingly popular item.

And who can describe the scene in the Park at night. The old-fashioned fair, stripped the imagination of the modern age. Dawn was nigh before the last of the excursionists had been walled away into the sky. The affair can be best summed up in the words of a regular, go-ahead, 250 per cent compound interest, gold-plated, tearaway, vim-zip, go-with-a-bang-citizen.

"Pink radio spats!" he exclaimed. "Those 1931 galoots knew how to enjoy themselves."



But curiosity succeeded curiosity. An age which drew all its harmony by tapping in to the music of the stars did not fail to derive amusement from the blare proceeding from the brazen instruments and drums borrowed from the British museum.

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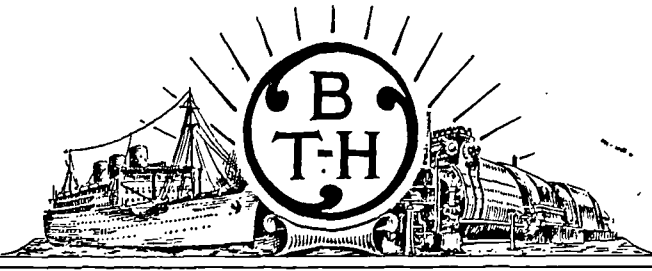
"Pink radio spats!" he exclaimed. "Those 1931 galoots knew how to enjoy themselves."

recorded by the Ministry of Labour Gazette.<sup>7</sup> The Home Market of 1936 put Coventry in overall first place on its indices of purchasing power and cautioned against placing too much emphasis on the social structure of a town.<sup>8</sup> Whilst explaining the workings of the 'simplified weighted aggregative index of purchasing power' in his Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom (1937), Cecil Chisholm had to refer to the

final difficulty which confronts us in the case of a few towns, where certain modern industries predominate and wage levels are considerably above the normal rates for the country. Typical industries of this class are aircraft and motor manufacturing (average wage paid in the latter industry for both skilled and unskilled workers has been over 80s a week for the past three years), printing, engraving and electrical engineering ... In the very limited number of towns so affected, the weight for insured workers has, therefore been increased proportionately to the higher average of wages earned in each of such towns. <sup>9</sup>

Aircraft and motor manufacturing and electrical engineering were of course pre-eminent among the city's industries at the time. The index revealed among other things that the city had only four fewer wireless dealers than butchers.<sup>10</sup>

Longstanding monitors of the national economic scene would have viewed Coventry's progress with interest following the Economic Journal's article of September 1907, which highlighted the local swing towards mechanical engineering and described the city as enjoying a decent prosperity by the standards of the times, with remarkably little grievous poverty.<sup>11</sup> This upturn came about after half a century of economic stagnation encompassing the dramatic decline in the fortunes of the silk weaving and watchmaking industries. In 1893 the largest ribbon producer in Coventry (James Hart's Victoria Works) closed, but in 1904 Courtauld



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British Thomson-Houston Co., Ltd.. Advertisement from City of Coventry  
Official Handbook (1933). BTH's output typified new industrial products.

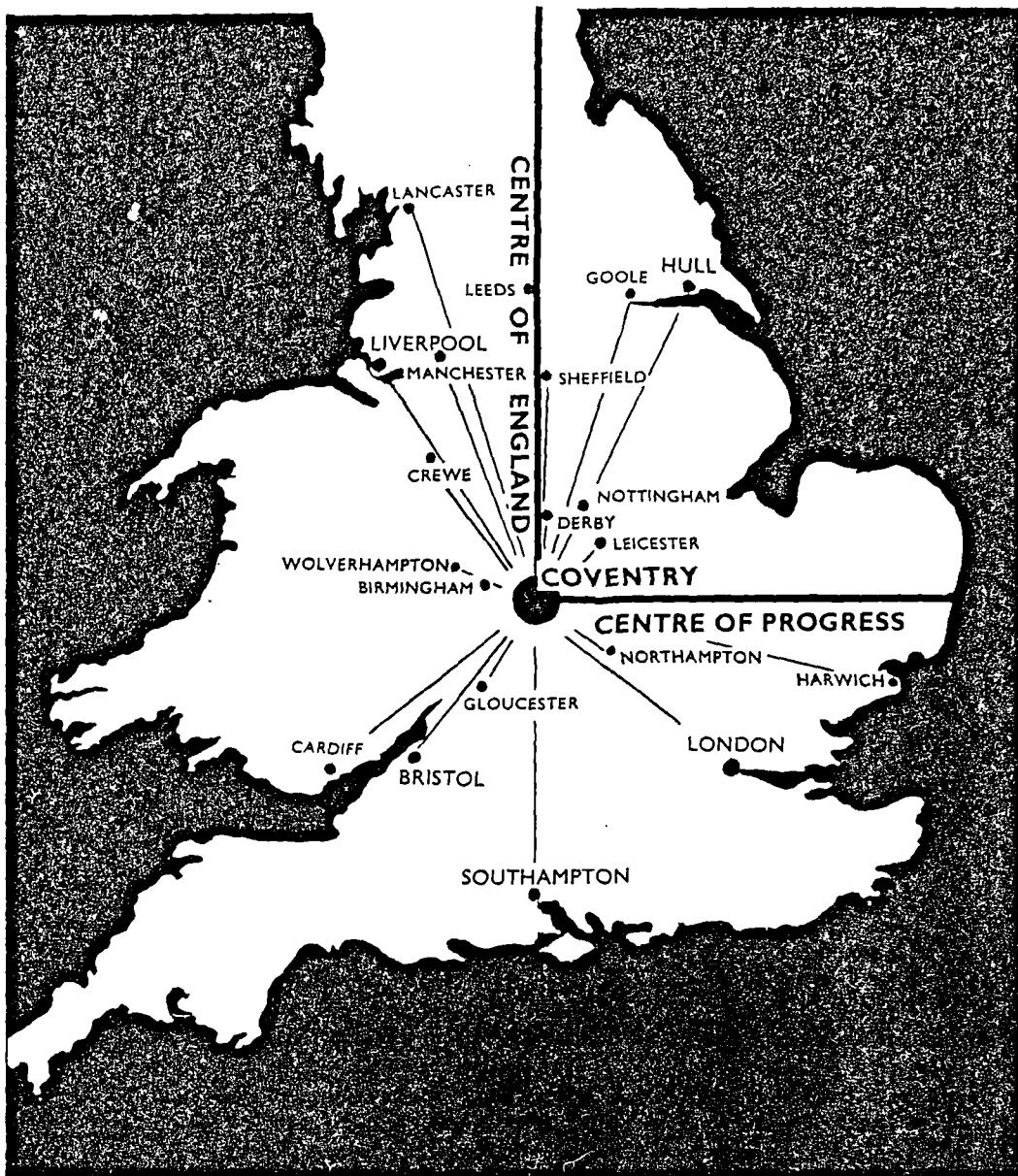
(manufacturers of rayon) arrived, and by 1905 there were twenty-nine motor manufacturers listed in local directories. In 1912 only thirty-five watch making concerns remained of the 106 listed sixteen years earlier in the city's directories, but in the same year British Thomson Houston arrived (see illustration), followed in 1916 by GEC. These examples typify the fundamental changes taking place around the turn of the century in Coventry's industrial profile. All were accentuated and accelerated by the pressures of wartime demand (1914-18).

According to Kenneth Richardson, this period in the city's history was marked by the circulation in polite society of countless tales of high wages, extravagance and revolutionary tendencies among Coventry men, and the way in which the 'guinea girls' employed locally in shell-filling, squandered their money on grand pianos which they could not play.<sup>12</sup> This represents both an early instance of the siege mentality noted by Raphael Samuel among the inter-war middle classes, and a local expression of bourgeois trepidation at working-class encroachment which was already a century-old phenomenon by this date.<sup>13</sup>

When the slump hit and Britain's staple industries - the former export giants of coal-mining, shipbuilding, textiles, iron and steel - were plunged into crisis, localised unemployment rates of up to sixty per cent were generated.<sup>14</sup> But simultaneously, in the Midlands and South East, the foundations of a new industrial structure were being laid. The citing of Coventry's experience as typifying this 'new industrial order' has become commonplace. Anne Phillips writes as follows:

Investment in building and construction, electrical engineering, bicycles, aircraft and cars, meant that if you lived in London, Oxford, Reading, Coventry, or even Birmingham, you would barely feel the affects of the Depression. Boom and crisis lived in different areas ... Poverty and privilege assumed a regional guise.<sup>15</sup>

## COVENTRY'S STRATEGIC POSITION.



Coventry is situated on the London, Midland and Scottish main line from London to Birmingham. It is 94 miles distant from London, 96 from Manchester, 112 from Liverpool, 98 from Bristol and 141 from Hull. Places within a 50-mile radius include Birmingham, Nottingham, Derby, Leicester, Wolverhampton, Gloucester and Northampton.

Coventry: Centre of England, Centre of Progress. From Corporation of Coventry, Directory of Manufacturers, 1st ed, 1936. A contemporary image which highlights Coventry's longstanding significance as a route centre.

The motor industry's development in the city was paralleled by that of the machine tool, electrical and aeronautics industry, giving Coventry what D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly have described as 'a development bloc of the new staple industries'.<sup>16</sup> Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason point out that many other towns in the 1930s would have been grateful for just one of them.<sup>17</sup>

The slump of 1930-31 hit the motor vehicle trade possibly less than any other major industry, with the index of production never falling below 94 per cent of the 1929 figure.<sup>18</sup> The year 1933 saw a boom in cycle production.<sup>19</sup> From the middle of the decade Coventry was closely identified with the push for rearmament: between 1936 and 1937 four shadow factories were built in and around the city. Coventry therefore remained in the public eye. Attempts by Coventry Corporation to raise loans through stock issues in 1934, 1936 and 1937 all met with success.<sup>20</sup> Individual Coventry companies with stock exchange listings also performed well.<sup>21</sup>

The city's earlier period of pre-eminence had been in the fourteenth century when it was ranked fourth in importance behind London, Bristol and York. The county of the city of Coventry was created in 1451, by which time its significance as a route centre was firmly established. By the turn of the twentieth century Coventry had proved its commercial endurance and versatility a number of times. The cloth and cap industries that brought it to prominence in the fifteenth century were revitalised in the sixteenth and seventeenth by the introduction of new sorts of cloth and ribbon weaving. Watchmaking was introduced in the eighteenth century, and this trade proved capable of diversification into sewing machine and bicycle production, and subsequently car manufacturing at the end of the nineteenth century. Although it could not find a place among Asa Briggs's 'great' Victorian cities, Coventry exhibited a longstanding, if underdeveloped, industrial profile.<sup>22</sup>

### *Local Population*

The three most salient facts about Coventry's demographic growth in the early part of this century are that it was very fast, very artisanal, and very male. Frederick Smith, Town Clerk during the 1930s, produced the figures shown in Table I (overleaf) to demonstrate the incredible pace of population increase.<sup>23</sup> More than forty-two thousand migrants were added to Coventry's burgeoning population between 1931 and 1939 alone.<sup>24</sup> The incomers were overwhelmingly young, male and working class (see Tables II and III); drawn by the prospects of employment in the city's new factories. This gave the city a somewhat skewed profile, both demographically and socially.

Mention has already been made of the 1936 Home Market publication that drew attention to Coventry's 'exceptionally low A grade figure (2.5%) and an exceptionally high C grade (84.5%)'.<sup>25</sup> The authors defined 'A' grade families as those in which the chief income earner had ten pounds a week or more, and 'C' grade families as those in which the chief income earner had up to four pounds per week. This was a longstanding characteristic of the city: the Coventry Herald described Coventry as an 'artisan town' in 1913.<sup>26</sup> The small number of middle class citizens could be explained by the paucity of substantial family firms in nineteenth-century Coventry and the accompanying economic stagnation of the period. This was aggravated by the proximity of Birmingham, which drew the regional bureaucracies of banking and insurance, and Warwick, which accommodated the county's expanding administrative operations.<sup>27</sup> These characteristics were to be reinforced during the inter-war period for the reasons described by Bill Lancaster. 'Blue collar rather than white-collar workers continued to dominate the migrant streams that flowed into Coventry. Inter-war economic growth demanded workers rather than managers and professionals'.<sup>28</sup> Frank Carr describes the city in 1937 as being 'divided

into a tiny class of owners and managers, a small group of retailers, businessman, professionals and small manufacturers, and a huge army of workers'.<sup>29</sup>

Table I. Population growth in Coventry by decades, 1891-1940

1891 population	52,742		
1901	"	69,978	A ten year increase of 33 per cent.
1911	"	106,349	" " 52 per cent.
1921	"	128,157	" " 20 per cent.
1931	"	178,126	" " 39 per cent.
1940	"	252,000	A nine year increase of 41 per cent.

Source: F. Smith, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Government, p.147.

Table II. Population distribution according to age, 1907. Per 1000.

	England and Wales	Coventry
Under 5	114.2	122.0
5 - 10	107.2	106.0
10 - 15	102.7	98.7
15 - 20	99.7	100.9
20 - 25	95.9	99.4
25 - 35	161.5	190.0
35 - 45	122.8	119.9
45 - 55	89.2	82.2
55 - 65	59.7	54.4
65 - 75	33.0	32.6
75 - 85	12.0	12.1
Over 85	1.5	1.4

Source: C.H. D'E Leppington, 'The Evolution of an Industrial Town', Economic Journal XVII Iss. 67 (Sept. 1907), p.348.



The city's failure to retain the loyalty of more affluent parts of the community has been widely commented on. Lancaster and Mason write that, 'By the time that Coventry began to enjoy prosperity the city had little appeal to the new breed of factory managers and company directors'. They note the irony that it was the car, the foundation of the city's new prosperity, that made it possible for this strata of society to enjoy the benefits of living in rural Warwickshire.<sup>30</sup> John Prest identifies this phenomenon even further back, in the mid-nineteenth century, when some ribbon manufacturers lived outside the city.<sup>31</sup>

In 1907 Coventry was the least feminine of all major towns in the United Kingdom.<sup>32</sup> The following comparison with other Warwickshire populations reveals the extent of the shortfall.

Table III. Warwickshire populations by sex, 1907

	Males	Females
Administrative County	197,756	210,471
Birmingham CB	245,789	263,780
Coventry CB	52,464	50,589

Source: B. Lancaster, 'Migration into Twentieth Century Coventry', in B. Lancaster and T. Mason, Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City, p.65.

By 1931 there were 1,697 more women than men in the city, but by the last years of the decade the previous situation had re-asserted itself and Coventry was one of the few places with an excess of males (114,023 compared to 110,224).<sup>33</sup> Given this demographic fact, and the attention which has been drawn to the very masculine nature of the city's industrial culture, it seems appropriate to pause to consider some aspects of women's presence in the city.<sup>34</sup>

Lancaster states, with reference to women's employment opportunities in the city, that 'there appears to have been a prejudice, held by both employers and workers, against married women working in factories'; yet medical investigators in the third quarter of the nineteenth century sought and found plentiful evidence of 'poor parenting' practices among Coventry's women factory workers with which to horrify select committees and other worthy bodies.<sup>35</sup> The statement also sits uneasily alongside comments made by the archivists of both Courtauld and GEC to the effect that both interests were partly drawn to the city by the ready availability of female labour.<sup>36</sup> The attitude of Coventry men towards the employment of their womenfolk, and of the women themselves towards the employment opportunities afforded them in the city, seem best described as ambivalent, rather than hostile. Certainly there may have been prejudice against a factory setting, but the suspicion of immoral behaviour in factories was nationwide and of long standing, not unique to Coventry as Lancaster implies.<sup>37</sup> Prejudice against working wives was certainly not confined to Coventry either.

More precise analysis of female employment patterns in the city is further hampered by the reduced scope of the 1921 and 1931 censuses which did not collect information on place of birth from which migration trends could be deduced. The surveys subsequently undertaken to remedy this defect are based on the place of issue of a sample of workers' national insurance books, and therefore reveal nothing about non-workers or non-insured workers, including women. Since most migrants to Coventry were young adult males it seems highly likely that most women travelling to the city were wives rejoining their husbands or fiancées intent on marriage. These women therefore constitute a shadowy presence among the statistics. As no data was collected on the marital status of Coventry workers in the 1931 census the possibilities of definition are further reduced.

The following evidence from three women is suggestive of the manner in which many women were drawn to this locality; in this case from Newcastle, Southend and Oldham. 'I had a sister in Coventry you see, and they thought there was a better chance for him to get work here, and we came down'.<sup>38</sup> 'He'd got a brother in Coventry you see, and we came here for Christmas and his brother talked him into coming in to Coventry and getting a job in the motorworks.'<sup>39</sup> 'Things grew so bad Charlie offered to go to Joe in the Midlands and try to find a job.'<sup>40</sup>

Jane Walsh, Charlie's wife, who eventually came to Coventry in 1939, probably voiced the fears felt by generations of women when contemplating the awesome difficulties posed by geographical relocation (although moves of a few miles might pose problems just as great);

bad as things were I just would not hear of it. Why should we leave the town in which we had been born and bred to settle among strangers? ... My old enemy - fear - raised its ugly head. I knew the worst in Oldham, but if Charlie lost his job ... in Coventry, I would be sunk. I did not know the cheapest shops there. And how could we move our furniture?<sup>41</sup>

Should a reasonable job prospect exist, the challenge of a move could be faced with reasonable equanimity by a man responsible primarily for himself in the new setting: the camaraderie of the workshop and the ministrations of a landlady would see to that. This is not to underestimate the cool reception given to many migrants, but to recognize the existence of networks based on place of origin and the frequent prior arrival of a close friend or relative. For women, typically charged with the responsibility for moving self, children and personal possessions and for the practical and emotional investment in establishing a new home, the prospect was wholly different. Difficult at the best of times, all these tasks were hampered by the separation from family and neighbourhood

networks, the safety net of local credit-worthiness, and knowledge hard-earned-by of the whereabouts of any given commodity at the lowest possible price.

The imbalance in the sexual composition of the population noted in 1907 and 1939 could be interpreted as giving women something of a 'scarcity value'. The description of Coventry as a frontier town with something of a Klondike feel to it, suggests that women may have been much sought after to 'soften the rough edges' of urban existence.<sup>42</sup> George Hodgkinson's thought processes following the collapse of the ceiling in his rented room are interesting in this context.

Upon wakening my throat was like a lime kiln, my breathing organs clogged up with the dust caused by the falling ceiling.

The incident set me thinking furiously about marriage ...

The lodging situation hotted up our plans to get wed.<sup>43</sup>

In their accounts of the city's carworkers and their wives both Linda Grant and Paul Thompson emphasise the increasingly precarious nature of masculine status based on skill.<sup>44</sup> Anxiety over the erosion of skill differentials in Coventry meant that unskilled or semi-skilled migrant recruits could expect to meet with hostile indifference in the workplace: enough to send them to seek solace elsewhere. Unfortunately in this circumstance, the traditional working man's bolt hole lacked something of its usual charm because as J.B. Priestley revealed, the pubs in Coventry were full of men discussing gears and magnetos.<sup>45</sup> Home (and family) or a hobby represented a much better alternative: a home-based hobby represented the best alternative of all.<sup>46</sup> Tensions present in many of the city's workplaces gave an added impetus to domesticity. Rowntree's tables of leisure-time activities are interesting in this connection too: the married men's entries reveal something about men's domestic identities in York at the same time (see Appendix One).

Employers were every bit as keen as sweethearts to draw women into the city. Whatever supplies of female labour had or had not existed in the earlier part of the century, they were quite inadequate now, causing consternation among several employers. Although the census is silent on the subject, other sources suggest that paid women workers were overwhelmingly young and single: this after all was the cheapest option for employers.<sup>47</sup> The operation of a marriage bar by one of the companies bothered by the shortage gives the lie to any suggestion that it was simply *female* labour that was required. The manual dexterity and tolerance of highly repetitive activity conventionally attributed to women, needed to be accompanied by the supposed docility and pliability of youth to be truly cost effective. A confident, assertive, older female workforce would constitute too great a challenge to Courtauld's genteel, paternalistic management style, not to mention its profit margins.

The 'rationale' adopted by men for keeping wives out of the workforce represented a complex amalgam of elements, both social and selfish; a proprietorial wish to remove them from the licentious attentions of other men in office or workshop environment, a perception of entitlement to instant attention and hot food on their return from work, a sense as old as 'Saint Monday' of an appropriate level of income relative to the inconvenience involved in earning more (a 'working' wife), and a crucial awareness in a status orientated workspace of the shame attached to a wife's employment, especially outside the home.

Women consenting to stay at home probably had a somewhat different agenda, and Josie Castle's assertion that 'it is difficult to explain [the] apparent reluctance of married female Coventrians to participate in paid employment' suggests a failure of imagination.<sup>48</sup> Although many women enjoyed the companionship and/or responsibilities of the work environment, including three from this study, after ten or a dozen years of being part

of a workforce which was commonly marginalised and undervalued, and occasionally sexually harrassed, most were keen to experience for themselves the challenges and pleasures of running their own home.

Women were as susceptible to ideas surrounding the appropriateness of paid employment after marriage as men, and the vigour with which domestic ideology was being promoted has been well documented.<sup>49</sup> Those tempted to challenge this cultural constraint could find the hostility of husband and/or workmates difficult to endure.<sup>50</sup> Linda Grant makes it abundantly clear in her work on 'Women in a Car Town' that women's skills in the car factories, as elsewhere, were universally denigrated by male co-workers and employers alike; there is some evidence to suggest that if women were prepared to accede to the injunction to stay at home, their skills as managers of the household budget were at least recognised. One husband from this study said of his wife: 'She was very careful. I mean, she could spend a pound and make it go a lot further than I could. So I was lucky that I'd got a good housewife'.<sup>51</sup>

A revealing indictment of regional difference in (male) expectations of wifely behaviour and its potential for damaging neighbourly relations was recorded by Leo Kuper in Coventry in 1953. His male respondent felt that the authorities should

... put all the Geordies, all the Scotch and all the Welsh together ... Everybody would be much happier if they lived with people who came from where they came from. They've been brought up in such different ways, for example, they think that a wife's place is in the home and only the man should go out. They don't see our [ Coventrian ] point of view, they think we're fools and they say we are henpecked.<sup>52</sup>

On 9 February 1937 a local furore was caused when a Coventry woman who was very determined to 'go out' appeared at the Freeman's Admission

Court to pursue her claim for admission to the freedom of the city. She had enrolled her deed of apprenticeship to the profession of pharmaceutical chemist five years earlier when the Town Clerk deemed it the proper course of action to accept it and await the future decision of the appropriate tribunal as to its validity. The freemen of Coventry opposed the claim and were represented by counsel. The legal technicalities of the case may be omitted but the Mayor's final verdict is revealing; he concluded that the issue was one of sex equality and that *in the matter of admission to the freedom*, women had equal rights with men.<sup>53</sup> This reflected in part the ancient rights to recognition as freemen enjoyed by Coventry women in the medieval period, but long since dwindled in practice. Lily Stevenson was duly sworn and admitted to the freedom. A legal action contesting the proceedings as being contrary to law was afterwards entered in the Chancery Division of the High Court of Justice by two freemen, claiming to be acting on behalf of themselves and the others. War prevented the case being heard and the action was discontinued by the plaintiffs in 1944. Coventry, however, had not waited to give the matter of sex equality a further airing; in November of the same year the first woman Mayor was elected. Alderman Alice Arnold had been the first woman to enter the city council in 1919. Less high profile but equally momentous was the recruitment in early 1938 of Coventry's first two policewomen, among the first in the country. The city's Chief Constable noted with satisfaction in his Annual Report that having completed the same basic training as their male counterparts, plus some unspecified additional training from the Birmingham policewomen, they had taken up their duties (non-uniform, stereotypically feminine but some patrol work) and 'quickly justified their appointment'.<sup>54</sup>

In paying tribute to Alice Arnold, at least two male contemporaries instinctively made comparisons with Lady Godiva. Frederick Smith (Town

Clerk, writing in 1945) said 'it is fitting that women should play a part in the local government of a city whose history has been marked by a succession of notable women, from the days of the famous Lady Godiva'.<sup>55</sup> John Yates (councillor and parliamentary candidate, writing in 1950) said 'The honour received was due to her, no woman since Godiva had done as much for Coventry'.<sup>56</sup> It would obviously be quite impossible to quantify the impact of this legendary figure on the city's consciousness, but it is worth remembering in the context of this gender-sensitive account, that despite the city's wealth of engineering talent and its purported association with Saint George, its chosen hero was a woman who reputedly rode naked through the town in fulfillment of a bargain wrung from her husband, the Earl Leofric, that would free the townsfolk from a heavy tax he had imposed. Not least among the feminine virtues Godiva embodied was, therefore, a sensitivity to matters pecuniary. Godiva was commemorated annually in the city's carnival procession, 'appeared' in at least one American film of the period, and was about to be immortalised in a bronze equestrian statue by Sir William Reid Dick, commissioned in 1939.

In the same context, one final Coventry "female" deserves consideration and this is the 'Old Lady of Hertford Street'. Such was the appellation given to the Coventry Savings Bank by the Bishop of Coventry in a speech of 1934, in deference to her great counterpart the 'Old Lady of Threadneedle Street', the Bank of England.<sup>57</sup> We might wonder that an august institution such as the Coventry Savings Bank, established by men and still managed by men a century later, should be designated female, but the functions carried out by the bank and the qualities it supposedly exhibited, and which are described in the text of the speech, were all strongly defined as feminine. The bank was caring, dependable, principled, conservative, a survivor, capable of inspiring affection, and pre-eminently good at managing money.



### *Local government.*

If municipal effectiveness were to be judged by its impact on the built environment, the record of Coventry's local government in the 1930s would tend to suggest a degree of vision and dynamism not altogether deserved. The city benefited from the addition of a number of showpiece public structures during that decade. These included the Public Abattoir and Drinkwater Arcade completed in 1932, Coventry Technical College opened in 1933, the new Market Hall of 1934, the airport of 1935, the Civic Art Gallery begun in 1939 and Coventry By-Pass completed in the same year. However, the story behind the considerable demolition and remodelling of central areas of the city was actually one of procrastination and parsimony. The Trinity Street scheme, which was nearing completion as the Second World War broke out, was originally put forward in 1904, whilst the public abattoir was the result of half a century of bitter debate, to give two small examples.

An uneasy coalition of Liberal- and Conservative-minded councillors continued to hold sway in local government, until finally put to rout in 1937 when Coventry became the first major Midland manufacturing town to fall to Labour.<sup>59</sup> The 'shopocracy' therefore exerted considerable influence during the period under discussion, as they had done throughout the previous century, and indeed continued to do in many other places.<sup>60</sup> According to Kenneth Richardson, the distinction between Liberal and Conservative was, in any case, an artificial one, which often amounted to no more than a difference of allegiance between church and chapel.<sup>60</sup> The *real* divisions were over public expenditure, with those prepared to support *some* investment in a rapidly expanding city with a crucially under-developed infrastructure, finding themselves isolated among the many committed to *laissez faire* and low rates.

Two explanations for the lacklustre performance of the council in its

pre-1937 formulation have been put forward. R.H.S. Crossman, selected as Coventry Labour's parliamentary candidate in 1937, focused on the absence of representatives from the city's vibrant manufacturing sector. He denounced the motor firms' unwillingness 'to permit able young executives to enter local politics, and do a stint on the City Council', and wrote that

Little of the vast experience and leadership of engineering management was put at the disposal of the City ... The failure of industrial management to take responsibility for civic affairs, and the absence of a local aristocracy with any tradition of public service, were accentuated by the middle-class exodus into the surrounding countryside which was in full swing by the mid 1930s.<sup>61</sup>

People drawn to the city to oversee the evolution of large organisations and maximise returns showed no inclination to settle there and contribute these same skills to its broader development. George Hodgkinson, Secretary of the Coventry Labour Party from 1923, focused instead on the presence of too many representatives of the city's retailing fraternity.

The so-called business man, often the small shopkeeper, with a mind to match, is not in my opinion in tune with the infinite challenge of local government ... The primary concern is not one of keeping a balance sheet and the accounts straight, but the maintenance of the highest standards of human and social satisfaction and of welfare provision.<sup>62</sup>

The occupational breakdown of councillors and aldermen produced by Frank Carr for the inter-war period is very revealing in this context. Over a fifth were manufacturers, mostly associated with old established trades such as watches, silk and clothing, and a similar sized group was from the professions, particularly lawyers and doctors. Builders, publicans and commercial agents were also well represented. Only a very small number were associated with the big engineering companies, whilst one third were

dealers or retailers, mostly shopkeepers.<sup>63</sup> The Council, then, was dominated by shopkeepers keen to maintain stringent economies and the status quo, whilst the very expertise which might have transformed the outlook of local government was denied it.

The two blocks of interest represented by local government and local industry could be seen to share a broadly similar (cost-cutting) ideology, and this enabled them to co-exist fairly happily. Communication between the groups was facilitated by a few individuals with links to both. One of these was John Varley, a local solicitor who moved in Coalition circles and was the full-time secretary of the Coventry and District Engineering Employers' Association. Another was Edward Iliffe, Conservative politician and owner of the Midland Daily Telegraph, the newspaper that claimed to enter 'fully seventy per cent of the homes of Coventry'.<sup>64</sup>

When Labour did well in the municipal elections of 1919, Liberals and Conservatives were forced into closer co-operation. By 1923 they had reached agreement on the allocation of seats and jobs on the council; by 1928 they had formally welded their fortunes together in a Coalition. Labour's improving share of the vote throughout the 1930s produced one last attempt at creative repackaging from the old guard. The 'Progressive Party' had the Conservative leader as Chairman and the Liberal leader as Vice-Chairman but was promoted as an apolitical grouping in order to entice the Coventry and District Engineering Employers Association (which eschewed party politics) into putting forward money, organisational skills and prospective candidates. It was also intended to reflect badly on the inferred dogmatism of the Labour Party.

Editorials and articles in the Conservative Midland Daily Telegraph from this time betray an increasing desperation to prod the 'shopocracy' - Coalition - Progressives into the type and vigour of activity necessary to secure its longterm electoral survival. In early 1936 it declared that

Coventry is now emerging from the shackles of a purely utilitarian era, stretching back for a hundred years or more. It has been an era of commercial revolution allied with civic stagnation during which the city has been so intent upon servicing the machine that it has given little thought to the service of its people. There are vast arrears to be overtaken, for succeeding generations have contented themselves in seeking solutions to the problems of the moment, and have given little thought to the future in any other sphere than those of mechanics and invention. Generations of bad planning - or a complete absence of planning - slums, narrow streets, overcrowding, sewers, all the trouble saved up for the present from an unimaginative past, must be tackled.<sup>65</sup>

The end of the year, however, saw insufficient improvement.

In recent years the Coalition has attempted to meet this Socialist organisation by placing in the field candidates whose names have been unknown to their constituents until a few days prior to nomination day. Elections have been fought on hastily-recruited ward committees, their organisation dependent upon the varying enthusiasm of individual candidates, and the degree of support they have been able to command among their personal friends.<sup>66</sup>

Almost exactly one year on, the paper was reflecting mournfully on the reasons for the Progressive's poor showing in the local election in which they finally lost control of the council. It was felt that they had a dearth of that type of candidate for municipal honour which is truly representative of the commercial and industrial life of the city. It has not been necessary to penetrate far "behind the scenes" to become aware of the almost frenzied search for candidates that has taken place during the months of September and October ... The work of the City Council has been carefully

shunned by many of our outstanding business men.<sup>67</sup>

The ruse had succeeded in drawing in both new faces and funds, but ultimately failed in its primary aim of securing electoral victory. The Progressive Party, exposed as having 'no common ideals other than opposition to socialism, no policies other than curbs on public spending, no electoral machinery, and a declining social base', was in no position to withstand the determined advance of the local Labour Party which had by this time evolved a central organisation, a programme of political activity and a policy for the future development of the city.<sup>68</sup>

We might ask why the local population did not act to eject its ideologically bankrupt officers more swiftly than it did? Three contributory factors may be suggested. The old guard were helped initially by the lack of enthusiasm for local government evinced by labour activists. Secondly, low rates were not unacceptable to the voting public. Lastly, the speed and composition of the city's population growth represented a considerable obstacle to political organisation: newcomers did not necessarily view the city as their long term home, and as relatively well paid young workers, their sympathy with Labour's aims could not be taken for granted.

In the lead up to the taking of municipal power in 1937, the worst charge that Labour could lay at the Coalition's door was that it failed to plan.

[They] part with land cheaply which should be retained. They have entered into commitments that must force up expenditure, and then borrow, the full weight of which is reserved for tomorrow. They do not plan. They wait upon events.<sup>69</sup>

If we substitute 'things' for 'land' in this diatribe, it mirrors to a startling degree both the specific allegations and the kind of language so often used to level criticism at working-class people for their modes

of money management. What was good advice for one was deemed equally applicable to the other, highlighting the surprising homogeneity of economic orthodoxy at that time.

A desire to protect deeply entrenched interests and avoid expenditure was clearly an inadequate philosophy with which to approach the management of a city in the process of transformation. Despite their name, the Progressives had, in fact, failed to meet the challenge of transforming themselves in response to very changed circumstances. The triumph of Labour, in contrast, was to have *appeared* to have met this creative challenge.<sup>70</sup> The specific influence of local government, in both its guises, on the development of Coventry's retail and residential environments is the subject of subsequent chapters.

## *Footnotes to Chapter One*

1. Coventry Hospital Carnival 'Official Programme', 1931.
2. D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly, 'Coventry's industrial economy, 1880-1980' in B. Lancaster and T. Mason (eds), Life and Labour in a Twentieth Century City: the Experience of Coventry, p.11.
3. K. Richardson, Twentieth Century Coventry, p.277. This was true even after allowing for the boundary extensions of 1928 and 1931.
4. University of London, Institute of Historical Research, Victoria History of the Counties of England Volume VIII (Oxford University Press, 1969), p.236.
5. D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly, 'Coventry's industrial economy, 1880-1980' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.35; and Lancaster and Mason, 'Society and politics in twentieth century Coventry', *ibid* p.345.
6. R. Prosser, 'Coventry: a study in urban continuity' (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1955), p.94.
7. The Times 10 Feb. 1934.
8. G. Harrison and F.C. Mitchell (eds), Home Market (1936), p.68.
9. C. Chisholm (ed), Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom and Census of Purchasing Power Distribution (1937), pp.47-48.
10. *Ibid* p.145. This statistic needs to be interpreted with caution however. By the next edition (1938), the number of wireless dealers had dropped dramatically from 240 to 148, suggesting the possibility of a typographical error in the earlier figure.
11. Cited in Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.39.
12. *Ibid* pp.37-38. Richardson does not cite his source.
13. R. Samuel, 'Suburbs under siege', New Socialist May/June 1983 p.28. Mrs Gaskell describes mill girls dressing like ladies in Mary Barton 1848 (1911), pp.6-7.
14. A. Phillips, Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class (1987), p.59.

15. Ibid.
16. Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's industrial economy, 1880-1980', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.24.
17. Lancaster and Mason in Life and Labour, p.343.
18. Prosser, 'Coventry: a study in urban continuity'. (MA thesis, University of Birmingham, 1955) p.94.
19. The Times 10 Feb. 1934.
20. The Times 24 Jan. 1934; 7 Feb. 1936; 22 Dec. 1937.
21. See for example The Times 11 Mar. 1938.
22. A. Briggs, Victorian Cities (Harmondsworth, 1968) p.47.
23. F. Smith, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Government (Coventry, 1945) p.147.
24. Lancaster and Mason, 'Society and politics in twentieth century Coventry', in Life and Labour pp.346-7.
25. Harrison and Mitchell (eds), Home Market, p.68.
26. Cited in Victoria History of the County of Warwick, p.236.
27. Lancaster and Mason in Life and Labour, p.344.
28. Lancaster, 'Who's a real Coventry kid? Migration into twentieth century kid', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.68.
29. F. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism: Labour's Rise to Power', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.172.
30. Lancaster and Mason in Life and Labour, p.344.
31. J. Prest, The Industrial Revolution in Coventry (1960), p.83.
32. J. Castle, 'Factory work for women: Courtaulds and GEC between the wars', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.136.
33. B. Lancaster, 'Who's a real Coventry kid?', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, pp.66-67.
34. See for example J. Castle, 'Factory work for women', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.136; L. Grant 'Women in a car town:



- Coventry, 1920-45' in P. Hudson and W.R. Lee (eds), Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective (Manchester, 1990); P. Thompson, 'Playing at being skilled men: Factory culture and pride in work skills among Coventry car workers', Social History Vol. 13 No. 1 Jan. 1988.
35. Lancaster, 'Migration into twentieth century Coventry', in Life and Labour, p.64; M. Hewitt, Wives and Mothers in Victorian Industry (USA, 1975) p.127, p.142, p.146, pp.147-48 and p.228.
36. J. Castle, 'Factory work for women' in Lancaster and Mason (eds) Life and Labour, p.136, pp.137-38 and p.140.
37. Ibid p.143.
38. Transcript of interview with Mrs W.
39. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
40. J. Walsh, Not Like This (1953) pp.87-88.
41. Ibid.
42. N. Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics (1990), p.7.
43. G. Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry (1970), p.33.
44. L. Grant 'Women in a car town' in Hudson and Lee (eds), Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective; P. Thompson, 'Playing at being skilled men' Social History Vol. 13 No. 1 Jan. 1988 pp.45-69.
45. J.B. Priestley, English Journey 1934. (1968), p.74.
46. For an extremely interesting discussion of the growth of hobbies see R. McKibbin, The Ideologies of Class: Social Relations in Britain, 1880-1950 (Oxford, 1991), Chapter 5.
47. Castle thinks it reasonable to assume that the trend identified by Leppington (Economic Journal, 17, 1907, pp.348-49) and confirmed by the 1911 and 1921 censal data continued. See Castle, 'Factory work for women' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.137.
48. Castle ibid p.136.

49. See for example Jill Greenfield, 'From "Angels in the House" to "The Craft Workers of Today": Women's roles and the ideology of domesticity in popular women's magazines in the 1930s' (MA thesis, University of Warwick, 1991).
50. See Grant 'Women in a car town' in Hudson and Lee (eds), Women's Work and the Family Economy in Historical Perspective p.239 and p.241.
51. Grant *ibid* p.242 (interview no. 26).
52. L. Kuper (ed), Living in Cities (1953), p.36.
53. F. Smith, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Government, p.181.
54. City of Coventry 'Report of the Chief Constable' for the year ended 31 Dec. 1938 p.5.
55. F. Smith, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Government, p.184.
56. J. Yates, Pioneers to Power (Coventry, 1950), p.88.
57. Bishop of Coventry, Dr. Mervyn Haigh, speech to the (99th) Annual Meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank on 30 Jan. 1934, recorded in the 'Annual Report'.
58. Lancaster and Mason in Life and Labour p.344.
59. The term 'shopocracy' adopted by Carr from P. Searby 'Weavers and Freemen in Coventry, 1820-1861' (PhD thesis, University of Warwick, 1972).
60. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.190.
61. R. Crossman in G. Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, p.xvii.
62. G. Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry (1970), p.108.
63. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.173.
64. Advertisement in Coventry Illustrated Souvenir (City of Coventry, 1935).
65. Editorial Midland Daily Telegraph 30 Jan. 1936; cited in Carr 'Municipal Socialism' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.178.
66. Midland Daily Telegraph 6 Nov. 1936; cited in Carr *ibid* pp.178-9.

67. Midland Daily Telegraph 24 Nov. 1937; cited in Carr *ibid* p.179.
68. Carr *ibid* p.178 and 180.
69. Election address in Midland Daily Telegraph 28 Oct. 1936; cited in Carr *ibid* p.181.
70. PRO HO 207/1069 (Report to the Ministry of Food, 1941) records the view that

Perhaps owing to the fact that Coventry has grown so rapidly, the municipal organisation of the city ... is a weak and feeble thing. Taking into account its importance as an industrial centre, Coventry is not adequately served by its local administration.

PRO Lab 26/81 (Ministry of Labour Report, 1940) expresses the same view.

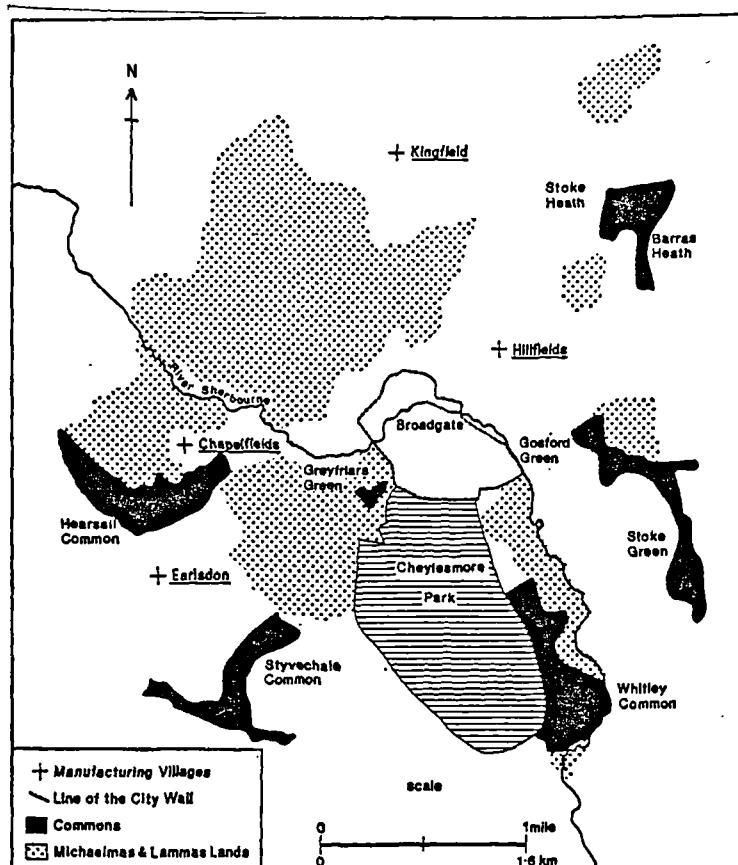
Influential men have told me that what Coventry wants is someone to push things through, that the Authorities will talk and talk but put off action to a future time, and there are obstructionists and muddlers with no imagination.

**CHAPTER TWO**

**Coventry's retail environment**

### *The early development of the city's retail environment*

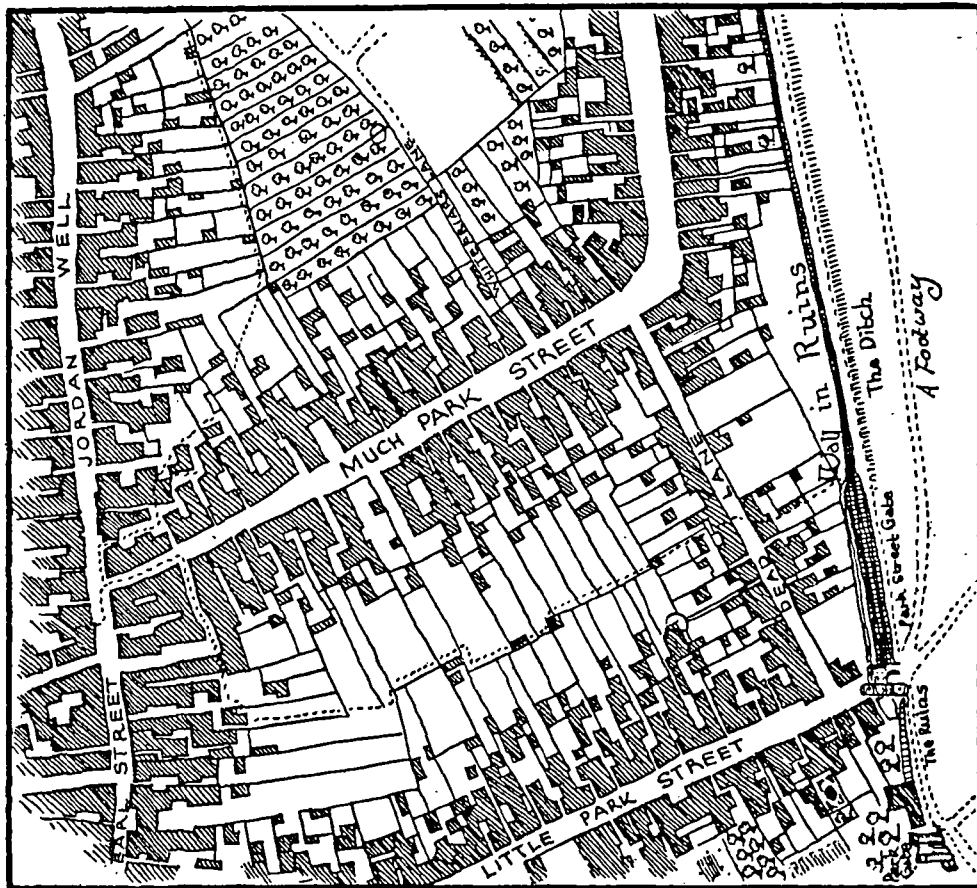
In Coventry as in many other places, the vested interests of powerful cliques have at different times influenced the city's geographical and commercial development. A pre-eminent example of this was the Freeman's refusal to relinquish rights of pasture over the extensive Michaelmas and Lammas meadows encircling Coventry before 1857 (see map 1). The dispute centred on whether the Freeman should be compensated in money or land, and various individuals exhausted themselves in trying to bring the two sides to an agreement, before the Health of Towns Act suggested to the Freeman that the time might be propitious to settle with the landowners.<sup>1</sup> Before this happened there was almost no possibility of the city expanding beyond its medieval core. John Prest records that in 1860 the city was still small enough for one man to walk the round of the wards to summon weavers to a meeting.<sup>2</sup> The only way in which the city could respond to the near doubling of its population between 1801 and 1841 was to intensify usage of its existing accommodation.<sup>3</sup> The long gardens and orchards that lay behind the half-timbered homes constructed by prosperous sixteenth- and seventeenth-century cloth merchants and their brick-built eighteenth-century neighbours were steadily infilled with low-grade, ill-lit, poorly serviced courts of houses. Maps 2 and 3 demonstrate the extent to which this had taken place by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. In the meantime, indiscriminate industrial and commercial development took place wherever an opportunity presented itself. Houses, warehouses, slaughter-houses, shops, workshops and ribbon manufactories sat side by side; while the brewers' extraction of water from the River Sherbourne *after* the dyers had finished with it demonstrated the general levels of chaos prevailing.<sup>4</sup> In 1831 just under six thousand inhabited houses squeezed alongside, or more usually behind, the modest network of medieval streets, which were themselves frequently



Map 1 shows the Michaelmas and Lammas lands encircling Coventry before 1857. Reproduced from the University of London, Institute of Historical Research, Victoria History of the Counties of England Vol 8 'The City of Coventry and Borough of Warwick' (multiple volumes, this volume 1969).



(b) The same area in 1881



(a) The Little Park Street and Much Park Street area of Coventry, 1748

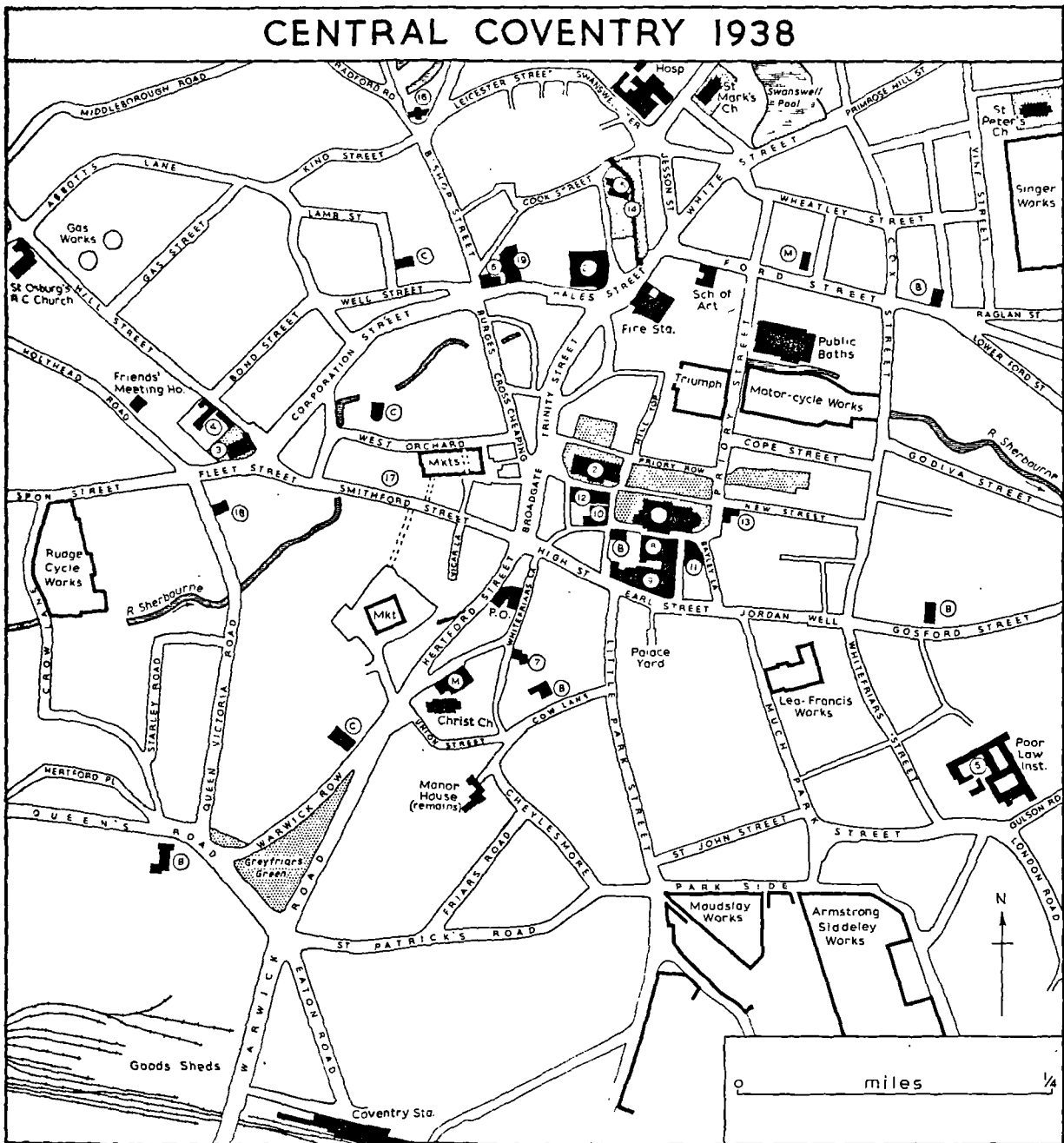
Maps 2 and 3 show the extent of infilling in Coventry by the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Reproduced from Frederick Smith, Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life (Coventry, 1945).

congested by open-air markets.<sup>5</sup>

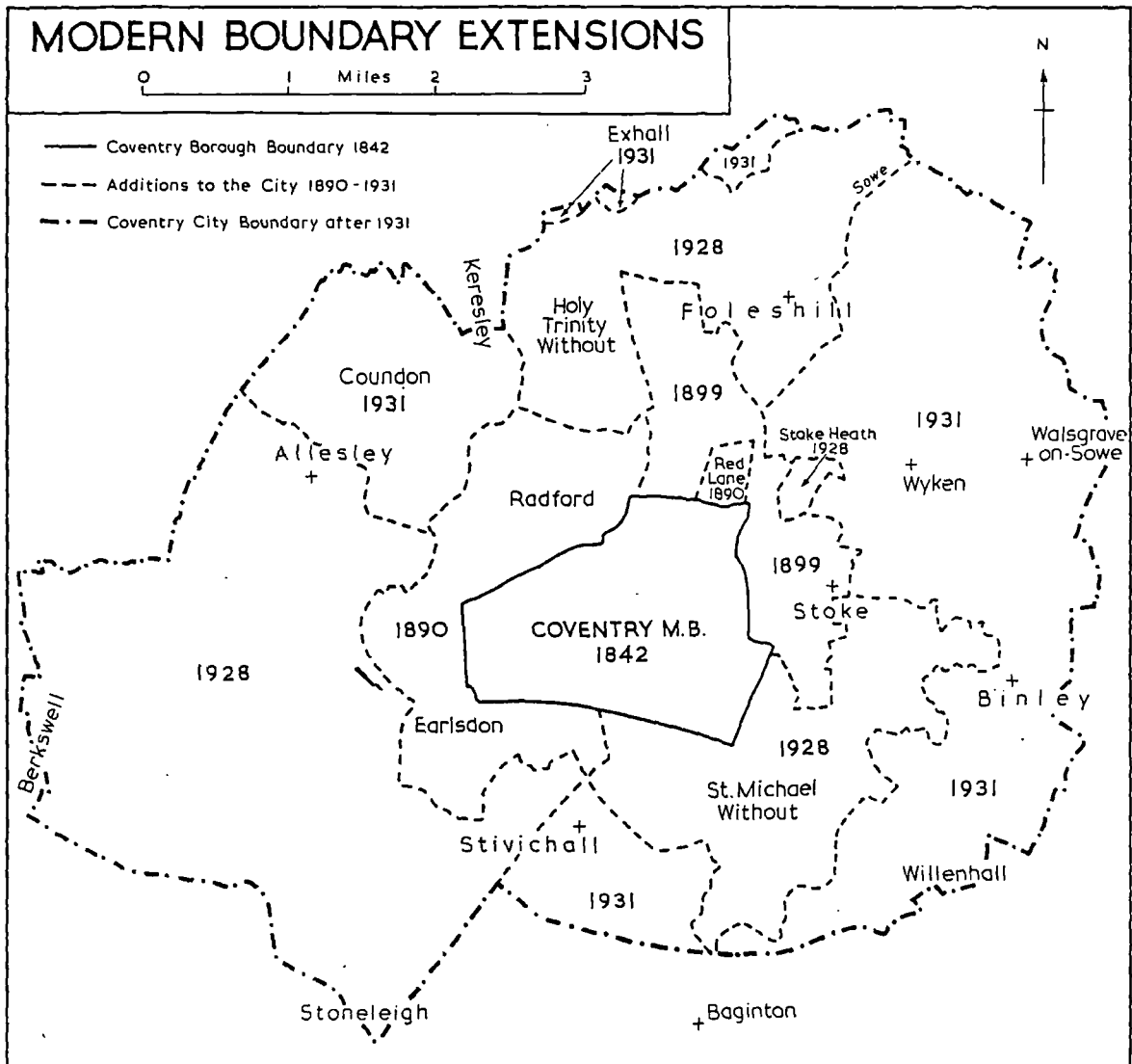
Some small improvements were put in place before the first major enclosure Act of 1860. In 1812, for example, an Act of Parliament authorised the cutting of Hertford Street (shown on map 4) to provide a better exit for travellers leaving Coventry in the direction of the county town of Warwick.<sup>6</sup> By 1830 Hertford Street was occupied by a combination of banking houses and quality shops, and the city's only wholly residential area of the period was growing up alongside it. This began with a row of townhouses overlooking Greyfriars Green and grew to encompass the impressive 'Quadrant' opposite, detached houses approaching the railway station (opened in 1838) and middle-class terraces in Queens Road. Its reputation as a 'superior residential suburb' was firmly established by the late nineteenth century.<sup>7</sup> Hertford Street was still being referred to as 'the quality street' of the city by commentators in 1964, and Kenneth Richardson states that in the immediate pre-war period 'such quality shops as there were in Coventry were to be found [there]'.<sup>8</sup>

In 1820 rebuilding took place at the very heart of the city in Broadgate, when this main junction required widening. Broadgate constituted the midpoint of the city's 'spine': the sequence of roads which ran south-east to north-west along Far Gosford Street, Gosford Street, Jordan Well, Earl Street, High Street, Broadgate, Smithford Street, Fleet Street and Spon End (see map 4). They formed part of the Leicester to Birmingham route as well as the route from London to Holyhead. The construction of three-storied, stucco-fronted buildings in Broadgate, with shop windows below and canopied balconies above reinforced the commercial nature of this major crossroad. Unsurprisingly then, when Thomas Telford proposed improving the London to Holyhead road by avoiding Coventry altogether, there was an outcry from local shopkeepers.<sup>9</sup> It was to pacify them and retain the trade accruing from travellers to and from Ireland, that the





Map 4 shows central Coventry in 1938. Reproduced from the University of London, Institute of Historical Research, Victoria History of the Counties of England Vol 8 'The City of Coventry and Borough of Warwick' (multiple volumes, this volume 1969). The 'spine' may be picked out running left to right.



Map 5 shows Coventry's boundary extensions between 1890 and the Second World War. Reproduced from the University of London, Institute of Historical Research, Victoria History of the Counties of England Vol 8 'The City of Coventry and Borough of Warwick' (multiple volumes, this volume 1969), p.3.

road eventually (1827-30) took in the 'spine' between Jordan Well and Fleet Street. The shopkeepers were therefore *directly responsible* for institutionalizing much of the traffic congestion that was later to pose such a daunting problem to shoppers and shopkeepers alike.

In 1828 the development of a 'New Town' called Hillfields was begun to the north-east of the city where the only break in the Michaelmas and Lammas lands occurred (see map 1). Here the ribbon weavers in their "top shops" were symptomatic of Coventry's failure to industrialise fully. The continued existence of the common lands and the resulting chronic shortage of space have been blamed with some justification for Coventry 'missing' the Industrial Revolution.<sup>10</sup> The majority of the two thousand houses built in the city between 1841 and 1861 were built in Hillfields.<sup>11</sup> Other building was taking place *outside* the city boundary in the watch-making hamlet of Earlsdon to the south-west of the city, and nearby but within the boundary, the sale of some charitable lands had freed Chapel Fields for development.

According to Prest a division in the city's class structure took place at this time, which suggests that this earlier phase of 'suburbanisation' had affected a geographical separation of social groups well before the 1930s.

For the last hundred years the working men of Coventry had been crowding into these courts. Good workmen and bad workmen had rubbed shoulders in the same court, or lived in adjacent courts. Now, however, with the opening of the new suburbs, it was the better class of weavers and other working men, corresponding closely to the freemen, who were extricating themselves from the old city ... The standard of living of those who could remove to Hillfields, or Chapelfields, or Earlsdon was going up, while the old courts became slums, and those who lived in them, degenerated



Looking down Market Street from Broadgate, 1933. This photograph shows Coventry's market tower with Boots on the left. For a view of Broadgate stretching away from Boots, see picture adjacent p.214.

into slum dwellers ... Over a period of thirty years ... the working class in Coventry was divided into two.<sup>12</sup>

An investigation carried out by a Superintendent of the General Board of Health in 1849 concluded that

Any measure less than [enclosure] cannot sufficiently alleviate the present depressed moral and physical condition of the thousands residing in the different alleys, yards, etc., already enumerated ... At present, the city is literally hide-bound, and the occupants of dwellings in lanes, yards, etc., exposed to a wretched existence.<sup>13</sup>

From 1853 a small environmental improvement was effected by the restriction of the sale of live animals to the new Smithfield open-air market, but the year 1860 marked a more significant turning point for the city. This year brought both the first of the Acts to enclose the greater part of the common lands, and the sudden and almost total demise of the city's ribbon industry following the removal of tariff protection.<sup>14</sup> Still reeling from this blow to its status, Coventry put up a small market hall in 1867 at a time 'when great Victorian towns were building great market halls', as Richardson put it.<sup>15</sup> The hall's modest size was in part compensated for by a very tall tower surmounted by a clock whose precision befitted a city with an established reputation for time-pieces. At the same time, the open markets were abolished, allowing the shopkeepers a mastery over the streets hitherto denied them. The removal of the mess and nuisance of the stalls together with the competition of the stallholders meant that the Market Hall represented a very attractive and worthwhile investment to Coventry's respectable retailing community.

Cleared of livestock and market traders, the streets yet proved increasingly inadequate as the city enjoyed a modest revival in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Nearly a hundred years had gone by

without significant alterations to the city's main thoroughfares. Even the High Street adjacent to Broadgate deteriorated after a hundred yards or so into a network of mean courtyards and slum dwellings with the second highest density rates in England.<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere cycle and light engineering firms were occupying factories and workshops abandoned by the weavers. The Chairman of Daimler spoke for many other incoming companies when he affirmed that they had found in Coventry a place almost perfectly suited to their needs.<sup>17</sup>

Although the local watchmaking industry was by now following its erstwhile companion into terminal decline, the new industries utilised some of the craftworkers' skills and the dramatic collapse in fortunes suffered by the city's ribbon weaving community was not to be repeated. A new and more sustained period of prosperity was being ushered in.

### *The Retailers' Response*

The impact of improving material circumstances had already been felt by many retailers in urban settings elsewhere in the country, although change occurred unevenly from at least the mid-nineteenth century onwards. Clearly opportunities existed for those who responded positively and dynamically and many did: the late Victorian period became the era of the retailing entrepreneur, with men such as William Whiteley, Michael Marks and Jesse Boot rising to prominence on a national stage. Many hundreds more who did not become household names still made significant contributions to the evolving retailing scene. Anyone who could improve the appeal of their business could 'justifiably hope for a dramatic rise in turnover and in profits'.<sup>18</sup>

In Coventry, however, the historic under-representation of the middle classes in the city and the relative economic stagnation of much of the nineteenth century meant that there were simply fewer retailers of the

kind who had the resources to respond at all. Although the high level of craft skills among Coventry watchmakers gave them and their families the potential to become a more discerning clientele for the city's shops, their low numbers precluded them from significantly influencing local retail development. Even at the height of their social ascendancy, they only made up a small fraction of the city's population, not enough to constitute a new buying public.<sup>19</sup> Retail development was being constrained in much the same way as urban development had been.

By the turn of the century, the mood among shopkeepers nationally had changed from expansive opportunism to trepidation. New kinds of shops, and groups of shops, were appearing on high streets in growing numbers. Variety chain stores, co-operative societies, multiples and department stores all appeared to threaten the livelihoods of the smaller independents, and commentators encouraged this beleaguered group to believe that for them, the end was nigh.<sup>20</sup> One of the results was a growing tendency for them to work together to campaign against perceived injustices. Michael Winstanley has described how

Individually and collectively shopkeepers never tired of complaining about the burden of local taxation, its method of assessment and its alleged inequitable treatment of retail premises, especially those in central trading areas.<sup>21</sup>

Associations were formed, retail sections were set up in the new Chambers of Commerce and shopkeepers consolidated their power in local government. Winstanley has identified shopkeeping 'blocks' on northern councils of fifty per cent or more in the period between 1900 and the First World War, so that the numerical dominance of retailers on Coventry Council in the inter-war years was neither unusual nor an extreme example.<sup>22</sup>

Rates became *the* dominant issue in Edwardian local politics, and candidates wishing to secure electoral success needed to offer a measure

of relief to ratepayers, not prestigious or socially useful municipal schemes, however pressing the need. The nexus of civically-minded shopkeepers on Coventry Council therefore seemed ideally placed to protect their own interests and indulge their favourite pastime of cutting costs. Two episodes from the early part of the century illustrate the equivocal response of retailers to the changing economic picture in Coventry and the interplay of formal and informal political power. Both involved attempts to expand or at least restore the number of shops in the city.

In 1910 Council member Vincent Wyles drew up a bold plan for a new road to transect the central area, providing a clearer exit route for traffic and a new shopping promenade extending to Primrose Hill Street on the edge of the 'New Town' of Hillfields. Existing shopkeepers and tradespeople were predictably afraid of the impact on their livelihoods, and made their opposition felt. A public petition was orchestrated and the idea was shelved, although not forever as it turned out.

Slightly earlier a much-needed street widening operation presented an opportunity to gather together on one site all the municipal departments currently dispersed around the city centre and create a single dignified edifice which would reflect the city's growing prestige. The high value of commercial sites made re-development prohibitively expensive. In this instance a number of shops were lost on the north side of Earl Street and despite a strong retailing presence on the Council, a strong body of opinion existed in favour of re-introducing a commercial element to the site when it was redeveloped as a Council House. It was proposed that municipal offices would occupy the first floor of the new building with retail premises beneath. There was a prolonged and bitter controversy during which time municipal elections were fought over the issue. The site stood vacant for ten years, while some councillors asserted that the city could not afford even the compromise scheme. The scheme for a



Council House with shops was eventually dropped, but only due to the intervention of John Burns, M.P., President of the Local Government Board, who wished for a more dignified response in the city where he had spent his early years as an engineer. Work finally began on the new building just before World War I.<sup>23</sup>

Flora Thompson reminds us that historically shopkeepers were not necessarily against the development of new shops in their locality per se. In Candleford Green, the 'more go-ahead spirits of the place', those who admired the new plate glass window at the grocer's and the plaster-of-paris model taking pride of place in the baker's display, recognised the development potential of a piece of adjacent land. Here there was room for 'a new Baptist chapel and a row of good shops, [which] would bring more trade to the place and encourage people to build more houses'.<sup>24</sup> Vincent Wyles, the councillor who put forward the proposal for Hillfields, was both Conservative and a butcher by trade, which serves as a reminder that not all of the 'shopocracy' could be written off as dead weight. Richardson characterises him as 'one of those Conservative radicals with a sincere interest in social reform who ... was never afraid to vote against his party'.<sup>25</sup> Corporation-sponsored schemes to create new retailing opportunities in the city offered the possibility of generating welcome revenue and certainly answered a genuine need, but they were approached with extreme caution, consistent with their sponsors' essential conservatism.

Between 1901 and 1939 the city's population more than tripled from a base of seventy thousand, growing by a phenomenal seventy five per cent between 1921 and 1939 alone.<sup>26</sup> By the end of this period the motor, aircraft, electrical and high quality engineering trades were paying high wages to as many people as had lived there in 1901, and they made up approximately one third of the population.<sup>27</sup> Together with their families

they constituted a sizeable new client base for local shops. An economic and demographic transformation had belatedly taken place.

By 1917 the city's Smithfield cattle market was running at a considerable loss as livestock sales declined in the increasingly urbanised setting. From that date it was changed into a general market in daily use, to complement the Market Hall. It was soon returning a good profit to the Corporation and in 1922 the site of the former military barracks was acquired, and fruit and vegetable stalls were located in the centre of the old parade ground.<sup>28</sup> The former military quarters were brought into play as urgently needed accomodation<sup>m</sup> for wholesalers. These two initiatives involved only changes in use of otherwise moribund property, and comparatively little expenditure, so the outcome for the Corporation could hardly fail to be satisfactory. In 1925 the City Treasurer was proud to be able to proclaim Coventry a 'ratepayers' paradise' at a Rotary meeting.<sup>29</sup>

In the following decade attention was focused on bringing into play some ideas about traffic circulation originally evolved by Vincent Wyles in the years 1910-1914. In 1931 a bold, new thoroughfare was opened forming a link between Fleet Street and Hales Street. It was called rather unimaginatively, Corporation Street and was originally envisaged as a principal shopping location.<sup>30</sup> But six years later it had signally failed to fulfill this part of its brief and was evolving an administrative and leisure function instead (see illustration). Distance and the intervention of the war are the explanations usually put forward for this failure.<sup>31</sup> Hunger for space and opportunity was not, it is argued, sufficiently voracious at that time to create a demand for accomodation<sup>m</sup> at such a tangent to the main locus of activity. However a more plausible explanation is that the broad, empty vistas either side of the dual carriageway failed to inspire business confidence, lacking as they so

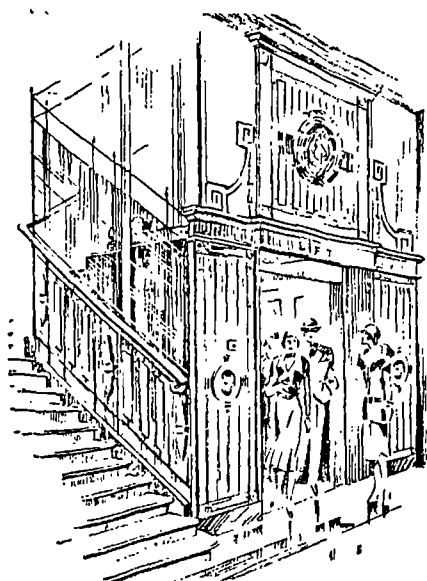


Top, an almost empty Corporation Street six years after completion (1937).  
Below, Smithford Street showing the entrance to the City Arcade, with Woolworths next door. Notice its 'nothing over 6d' fascia.

strikingly did the intimate scale of the older shopping streets. Would-be expansionists were wise to reject this opportunity.

In 1932 the City took practical steps to improve access to the separate market facilities. Two arcades of necessarily modest shops were developed to link Smithford Street, the city's main pre-war shopping street, with the Barracks Market to the south and the Market Hall to the north (their locations are marked by dotted lines on Map 4). This made sound commercial sense, at least as far as the Corporation coffers were concerned. The Drinkwater Arcade cost £41,545 to build and its twenty-four premises were clear of debt within the short space of six years.<sup>32</sup> Whether it made quite as much sense for the 'shopocracy' is less easy to say. Locally based retail operations were increasingly losing ground to branches of national multiples, most of whom were represented in the city by the 1930s. Appendix Two lists all those located in the centre of the city by 1939. As J. B. Priestley was to note in the autumn of the following year, the remains of the cloth, clock and ribbon periods in the centre of the city were now 'oddly mixed up with Lyons, cheap tailors, Ronald Colman, cut-price shops, berets and loudspeakers'.<sup>33</sup>

The decision to promote the Arcades may also be interpreted as a response to the forthcoming opening of the Coventry and District Co-operative Society's new central premises in West Orchard. This new venture was to be the closest thing the city had to a department store until the arrival of Owen Owen in late 1937, and could with some justice lay claim to being 'Coventry's most modern and complete store', with the added lure of having 'one-twelfth of your money handed back to you'.<sup>34</sup> The fear which the Co-operative movement inspired among ordinary retailers is reflected in the pages of the journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, which consistently featured items about it in the 1930s.<sup>35</sup> The Corporation's two tantalising new arcades each offered twenty-four retail



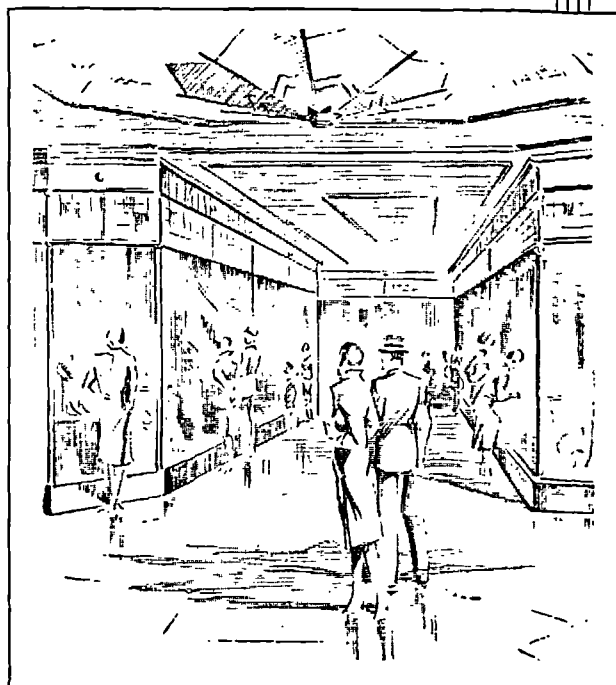
*The  
most pleasant*  
**SHOPPING  
CENTRE**  
*in the City*

Modern women, most critical of judges, are unanimous in their approval of the new CO-OP store

THESE sketches serve to give an impression of the modern style and efficiency of the new CO-OP Central Premises. Acclaimed as Coventry's most modern and complete store, this magnificent building is steadily growing and already forms a fitting hub for the many branches of Co-operative enterprise in Coventry and District.

Every shilling in every pound spent at the CO-OP will buy the most for money—and in addition the DIVIDEND of 1/8 in the £ means an extra saving. It is really one-twelfth of your money handed back to you.

**COVENTRY AND DISTRICT  
CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LTD.  
WEST ORCHARD, COVENTRY.**



**SHOP AT THE CO-OP—IT PAYS**  
*TO SUPPORT COVENTRY'S MOST PROGRESSIVE STORE*

outlets, with Marks and Spencer and F.W. Woolworth close at hand, and all were positioned closer to the buses in Broadgate than the Co-operative's West Orchard site.

There were no more additions of this kind to the occupied retail floorspace in central Coventry pre-1939. There may even have been some diminution. In 1934 the City Council embarked on improvements to the Barracks Market which provided 108 stalls in covered accommodation when completed in 1936.<sup>36</sup> The Corporation expressed the view that having been more 'modernly-designed', the Market now represented 'one of the best of its kind in the country'.<sup>37</sup> However considerable dislocation must have been caused to traders during the intervening period. To make matters worse, the Smithfield Market had been closed in 1933. By early 1938, the Council were displaying a willingness to claw back space for large-scale retail operations wishing to establish themselves in the city. A number of shops in Market Hall were demolished to accommodate the broad, new frontage and depth of British Home Stores at 56-58 Smithford Street, directly opposite F. W. Woolworth at numbers 17-18, and only yards away from Marks and Spencer at 12-14.<sup>38</sup> The number of Market Hall shops was thereby reduced to twenty-six.<sup>39</sup> September 1937 saw the opening of the impressive 1,850 square yard site of Owen Owen's new department store and the equally new Trinity Street on which it stood. But the creation of another grand thoroughfare and an island site large enough to attract such a prestigious retail operation had involved the demolition of a dense network of smaller shops in decaying properties in and around Butcher Row and Little Butcher Row. The Corporation even slightly remodelled Broadgate, the 'hub' of the city, to Owen Owen's advantage.<sup>40</sup> Retail accommodation was being constructed the length of Trinity Street but had not been completed by late 1938.

In November 1937 Labour took power in the local elections, and at a



Top, Smithford Street taken from the first floor of the City Arcade showing Woolworth's cafe (mentioned by Mrs N) to the right, and the broad, new frontage of British Home Stores on the opposite side of the road. Below, Trinity Street under development with Owen Owen's at the top.

distance of sixty years it seems staggering that shopping played such a key role in their political strategy. Richard Crossman, adopted as Coventry's Labour parliamentary candidate in the same year, wrote of the Thirties:

By now in fact the priorities of Coventry Labour had clearly emerged. It would remain first and foremost a local trade union movement. In addition to its main industrial activities it would continue to *provide the trade unionists and their wives, through the two co-operative societies, shopping facilities and saving facilities* which should in the end *make the Coventry working class virtually independent of capitalist trading*. And now in addition Coventry Labour was conducting a sustained political offensive designed to capture complete control of the Council House. Once captured they would hope to hold it permanently, and *thereby to bring under working class control* not only the main social services but *municipal trading* and estate management.<sup>41</sup>

A co-operative movement that encompassed the whole city and made meaningful links with public ownership and municipal enterprise could only be achieved through careful planning, so it was not difficult for Labour to identify themselves as the 'party of planning' and put this activity at the heart of their campaign. Even before Labour came to power George Hodgkinson (then Secretary of Coventry Labour Party) was urging the Council to 'look forward to the day when central property would be required by the Corporation for laying out the centre of the city on the lines followed by Continental cities'.<sup>42</sup>

In the immediate wake of their election victory, the new Labour council took two innovative steps that followed naturally from their emphasis on planning, (in the organisational and the architectural sense)



which was later to earn them national renown. They appointed a town architect, one of the first such posts in the country, and created a Policy Advisory Committee to develop long term policy for the city and act in an advisory capacity to other council committees. However, debates around money, the meanings it could carry and the uses to which it could be put - as investment, as reward, as the province of the usurer - continued to arouse strong emotions not easily reconciled to the party's stated aims. Tom Harris, for instance, a keen orator and first Labour Mayor of Coventry, had a horror of borrowing which would have ensured a warm welcome for him on the Coalition benches. The rapidly revealed materialism of the trade unions shook George Hodgkinson's faith in the achievability of the Party's aims.

Were we to be the milch cow for the trade unions and to what extent would they share the responsibility of government ? ... The Labour Party had power in its hands, it had socialist aims, but could it be said that our affiliates had socialism in their hearts, and were we to be activated by "divine discontent" or a scramble for a penny bun?<sup>43</sup>

Carr has drawn attention to the central irony of Labour's position in Coventry after 1937; 'far from having stormed the citadel of Capital, [they] had to preside over the renewal of the city, and make up for several decades of neglect', a process that inevitably meant 'they were bound to improve services to capital as well'.<sup>44</sup> In the immediate post-war period this crucial tension was to provoke the resignation from the Party of Alderman Bill Halliwell, chairman of the Policy Advisory Committee, on the grounds that Labour's commitment to rebuilding the centre of the city was a drain on local resources and could only help to create a better environment for capitalism to operate in. We may imagine the tortuous attempts of the Policy Advisory Committee to square this circle in 1937.

The question put to Richard Crossman by one 'co-operator' in 1955 is testimony to the tenacity of the co-operative ideal, and indicative of one of the labour movement's own blind spots. 'What are we to do', he was asked, 'when our members draw the "divi" in order to spend it at Marks and Spencers round the corner?'.<sup>45</sup>

### *Representing the City's Shopping Facilities: Truth and Fable*

The gradual evolution of the city's shopping facilities may be traced through articles appearing in the Official Guides produced regularly by the City of Coventry, but more interesting still are the subtexts. The changes in emphasis, language and allusion clearly reflect the changing representation on the City Council between 1930 and 1939 and the different concerns and cultural frameworks of the parties involved.

The 1930 version of 'A good shopping centre' was replicated from the 1927 Official Handbook, produced during the same period that the Liberal and Conservative Coalition, with its high proportion of dealers and retailers, was stitching together its common defence against Socialism.<sup>46</sup> The first third is taken up with evocations of electrical power, clean air and clean buildings. It is permeated by a sense of relief that Coventry has been spared 'the fate that has befallen many other ... towns of England'; and the references are all to 'quaint beauty', 'medieval legacies', 'beautiful relics' and 'historical richness'.<sup>47</sup> The word 'shop' does not appear in this opening section at all: first the city's claim to respectable historical significance had to be established.

The second paragraph concedes that 'here and there old-established businesses may be found lingering in ancient premises with Gothic or Jacobean woodwork on their shop fronts', but goes on to reassure that 'for the most part the shops of the city have been modernised and brought into harmony with modern ideas'. '*Some good retail shops*' (my italics) may be

found in Broadgate, designated the 'centre of the City's life': not many, but some. Smithford Street has 'strategic importance' because it marks the route out of the city to Birmingham, not because it functions as the busiest shopping area of all. The conceit is adopted that the city's streets 'radiate from [Broadgate] like the spokes of a wheel', a simile so beloved by subsequent editors that it remained through several re-writes. The claim of Hertford Street to be the venue for 'quality shopping' is not put forward, mainly to aid the illusion that 'modern, well-appointed shops carry[ing] thoroughly up-to-date stocks not only of the necessities of life but also of the things concerning matters of taste and luxury' are numerous and dispersed throughout the area.

The last paragraph contains an inference that although 'the fast-growing population attracted by the ever-increasing demands of labour for the factories ... offers an increasing prosperity to retail traders', it is not them but the 'many thousands of visitors who came to the City every year' who bought the luxury goods and things of fashion. The piece closes with a glance back to the traditional trappings of regional significance; Coventry is 'a market town ... [where] country folk come to do their shopping'. The claim is made that the city is 'one of the most important shopping centres in this part of England'.

Most of the claims made simply do not stand up to scrutiny. The city's population may have been racing upwards towards the totals achieved by neighbouring Nottingham and Leicester, but in terms of amenities it could not hope to compete with regional centres of such maturity. Nottingham had achieved the generous ratio of one shop to every fifty-nine members of its population as far back as 1850.<sup>49</sup> Birmingham likewise was firmly established as a commercial and financial centre for the Midlands. That the dearth of quality shops and cultural institutions was responsible for keeping the middle classes away was regarded as a commonplace. Those

that persevered used 'one or two shops in Coventry ... if absolutely necessary', but more typically travelled to Leamington, London, or to a lesser extent Birmingham.<sup>49</sup>

That some people *did* travel into the city is indisputable. A network of bus routes linking Coventry with Nuneaton, Rugby, Leicester, Birmingham, Stratford-on-Avon, Leamington and Warwick had definitely been established by a few years later; although this could just as well have been spiriting Coventrians away as carrying visitors in. Some support for the idea of the city as a haunt for tourists is given by advertisements appearing in the same edition of the Guide: the Cosy Café 'Coventry's brightest and best' is promoted as 'the one nearest the station', and the London Hotel in Jordan Well announces that 'motorists are specially catered for'.<sup>50</sup> People from the immediate rural vicinity would certainly have made use of the city's facilities, but any shopping done by tourists would surely have been incidental, in the absence of an established souvenir market. Coventry did not have an extensive and well-developed hinterland. Thirty years later it was estimated that only sixty-one per cent. of the city's and twenty per cent. of the region's expenditure took place in the central area.<sup>51</sup>

The idea that large numbers of well-paid workers automatically brought increased prosperity to retail traders is not borne out either. The 1929 petition from one hundred members of the Retail Section of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce to the Civic Authority complaining about excessive increases in water charges, and the 1932 protest to the City's Planning Committee by the Coventry Branch of the Birmingham and Midlands Hairdressers' Association alleging unfair competition caused by the use of private houses for trading, do not suggest the existence of more than enough trade to go round, or of profits more than adequate to absorb increased overheads.<sup>52</sup> The Chamber of Commerce's organisation of a month-long 'Shopping Festival' with a competition involving generous prizes

(Hillman Minx; £50; GEC radiogram) in central Coventry in 1933, was undoubtedly meant to boost the profile of the 250 independent retailers who participated.<sup>53</sup> As such, it constituted a rearguard action against the ever more firmly entrenched and more numerous multiples and variety chain stores, and a direct challenge to the new Co-operative Central Store.

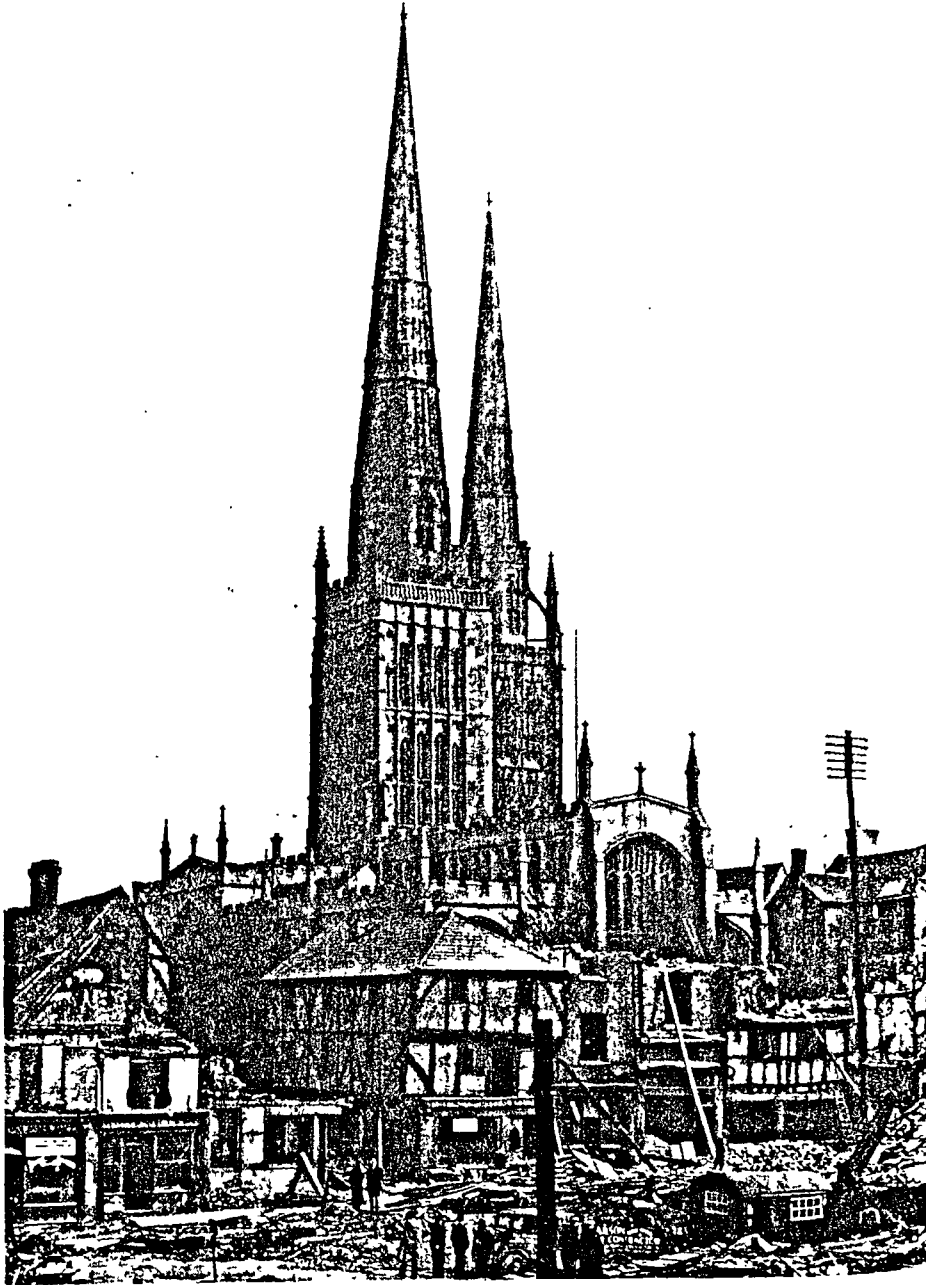
The longevity and vigour of shopkeepers' campaigning forums in both the City Council and the Chamber of Commerce are in distinct contrast to the absence of any distinctive local trading initiatives. Despite the considerable prospects offered by thousands of relocated and relatively prosperous workers, each of them caught up to some extent in the mythology of a land of opportunity, and a city renowned for the production of new goods, no Coventry retailing supremo emerged. A counterpart to Jesse Boot, Michael Marks, Joseph Hepworth was conspicuous only by her/his absence.

Margaret Stacey's fieldwork begun in Banbury in 1948 is helpful in reaching an understanding of why this might be.<sup>54</sup> Banbury shared a surprising number of characteristics with Coventry, although in population terms it was less than one tenth the size that the city had attained in 1931. These include virtual commercial stagnation during the nineteenth century, a tendency to allow local industries to 'become outdated and to "die on their hands"' and to leave the introduction of new skills and new activities to immigrants.<sup>55</sup> Like Coventry too, it enjoyed a revival of manufacturing activity and dramatic population growth through migration thanks to the establishment of new industries in the 1930s. Even the built environment sounds strangely familiar: 'Facing shops like Woolworths with their wide plate-glass windows are shops housed in Tudor buildings or with their pargeting still preserved ... In the maze of small streets that lie behind the shops ... is a miscellaneous collection of factories and workshops'.<sup>56</sup>

Shopkeepers played a prominent role in maintaining Banbury's social and cultural fabric, and therefore feature strongly in Stacey's analysis of the significance of tradition and change in the town. Her observations are worth quoting at some length.

Numerically Banbury may not be a town of shopkeepers, but shopkeepers and their like working in traditional industries form the backbone of its leadership ... In traditional industry the stress laid on social and personal values affects, and in some cases outweighs, purely economic or business values. It is remarkable, for instance, that traditionally minded owners do not open branch shops in the outlying districts of Banbury ... The author believes that [this is] less from lack of capital than from lack of inclination. These businessmen fall among those who are concerned to have "adequate" or "reasonable" returns for their work rather than the maximum possible returns.<sup>57</sup>

She concluded that the shopkeeper's business profile was only one element in a matrix that also involved religious, political, personal and social elements. These were what determined her/his status and peer group make-up, the amount of profit it was appropriate to make, the degree of deference she/he was entitled to expect and the level of comfort she/he could expect to live in. Immense importance was attached to the maintenance of personal relationships. Business expansion involving administrative delegation would diminish the satisfaction derived from interacting with staff and customers, and might also threaten stable peer group relations. Success or failure could be equally ignominious. Greater income would not, by itself, be sufficient compensation for the additional strains imposed by new and unfamiliar business practices. Besides, conformity and conservatism were bedrock values: 'His is not the attitude of the experimentalist; he is not always on the look-out for new and



Major demolition work was a feature of the period. This image shows clearance work underway in the Butcher Row and Little Butcher row area preparatory to the construction of Trinity Street and Owen Owen. These two streets previously constituted a dense network of older retail premises.

better ways of working ... The pressure to conform to group standards and to avoid eccentric behaviour was considerable'.<sup>58</sup>

The risks involved in business reorganisation were clearly greater than this innately cautious group were accustomed to taking, and at the same time involved a lot more than money. The concept of sufficiency was at the heart of traditional Banbury's social organisation, and Stacey's findings showed that for these shopkeepers it simply did not pay to be too ambitious. Coventry's respectable retailers appear to have felt more comfortable working together over issues involving a group-legitimated sense of grievance, than striking out on a bold, new venture of their own devising.

The 1933 version of the City of Coventry's Official Handbook added little to its previous description of shopping facilities beyond a brief announcement that new showrooms for the Gas and Electricity Departments were being erected on the recently completed Corporation Street, that new shops would hopefully follow, and that clearance work in preparation for the construction of Trinity Street had been started.<sup>59</sup> J. B. Priestley offered some confirmation of the long cherished view that Coventry's skies were superior to those of other industrial cities at about this time.<sup>60</sup> However their clarity must frequently have been challenged during this period by the clouds of dust and debris arising from the extensive demolition work entailed in clearing the way not just for the new roadworks, but for the numerous other redevelopment schemes underway at the time (see illustration). Priestley may have avoided this cataclysmic vision by the merest good fortune.

The 1937 Official Guide description was startlingly different in so far as it was only one third as long as earlier versions.<sup>61</sup> In the space remaining it retained many of the earlier conventions including the 'spokes of a wheel' idea (despite the fact that Corporation Street could by no



stretch of the imagination be equated with a spoke, although it could perhaps have been the rim!), but made two notable additions to the text: the 'fine buildings of the Co-operative Society' were mentioned for the first time, as were the Market Hall and Barracks Market.<sup>62</sup> In this way it distinguished itself as the production of a newly constituted Labour dominated Council. Rhetorical flourish gave way to a political agenda. That the markets were viewed in much the same light as the Co-operative movement, as part of the socialist strategy to bring about a more equitable distribution of wealth, is clear from comments made by the General Manager of the Markets, Reginald Yeadon, in his 'Annual Report'.

The revenue derived constitutes a record, in spite of the keen competition from the opening of two new stores in the City, thus proving that modern well-equipped and organised markets can more than hold their own against private enterprise.<sup>63</sup>

The attitude of the Corporation towards the markets was transformed as much by the recently appointed and clearly enthusiastic Yeadon, as by the change in political complexion of the governing body. He contributed a brief history of the city's markets to the Official Guide in his role as Departmental Head, and transformed the 'Annual Reports' from dry statistical data to a digestible account of achievements to date and requirements for the future.<sup>64</sup> He still had to make impassioned pleas for long-term planning and investment: there were financial constraints, even for Labour well-wishers.

For the year ending March 1938, Yeadon was able to report that income from the Market Hall was up despite the loss of some shops to make way for the British Home Stores; changes in tenancy were few and competition for those vacancies arising keen.<sup>65</sup> In the short-term he recommended upward revision of rents to bring them into line with prevailing commercial rates; and in the long-term, redevelopment of the

Market Square (Place) to capitalize on the opportunity presented by the demolition of the Dolphin Inn. The recently remodelled Barracks Market was flourishing and interest in the 108 stalls was sufficient to force the opening of a waiting list of prospective tenants. Record-breaking revenues were achieved in the face of keen competition from the two new stores already mentioned. The real problem was on the wholesale side of the market. The standings had been continuously tenanted including the extra accommodation provided in the old Meteor Works, and inquiries were still being received from all over the country. Yeadon sounded a note of frustration that procedure in the matter of providing a new wholesale facility had been deferred twice during the year. This was a disappointment of some note as it was clear to him that the space freed by its relocation was ideally suited to the development of 'a modern shopping centre which would undoubtedly be a distinct acquisition to your Markets Undertakings'.<sup>55</sup>

In both 1938 and 1939 the City Arcade experienced only one change of tenancy and income was 'steadily maintained'.<sup>57</sup> Yeadon expressed the view elsewhere that this had become 'one of the main shopping centres of the city'.<sup>58</sup> The implementation from January 1939 of steep rent increases in the Market Hall of between fifty and one hundred and fifty per cent. apparently met with only one dissenting voice and did nothing to dampen the enthusiasm from prospective tenants. Rents in the retail fish section were more heavily increased than elsewhere and still the demand for this type of accommodation was increasing. This appears to be a measure of the happy trading conditions that prevailed here, in stark contrast to the vocal complaints of the shopkeeping fraternity. It had already been found necessary to widen the entrance to the Hall from the Drinkwater Arcade to better accommodate the throng of shoppers. In the Barracks Market all stalls were continuously tenanted and the previous year's increased

revenue was maintained. The sticking point, as ever, was the Wholesale Standings where tenants had unanimously accepted the proposed increase in rents but any long-term solution to the problem of inadequate space was now being hampered by the uncertainty of the international situation. A further indicator of health in this area of retailing activity is provided by the income derived from car parking charges introduced by the Market Committee from 1 January 1939 which 'surpassed all expectations'.<sup>69</sup> Yeadon concluded his comments on the year as follows:

The Committee will realise that they control one of the most successful Markets Undertakings in the country, and one which is the envy of many Local Authorities. A long-sighted policy should, however, be considered, particularly with regard to the development of the Barracks Market and the establishment of a modern Wholesale Fish, Fruit, Flower and Vegetable Market. I have no hesitation in saying that a development of this description would be an asset and a paying proposition to an ever growing City like Coventry.<sup>70</sup>

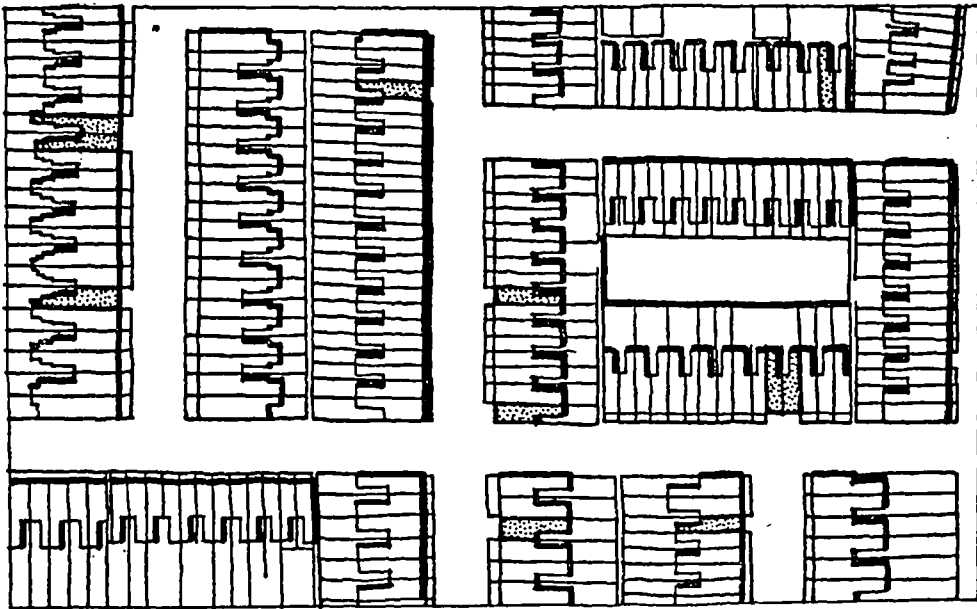
The faith expressed by the Markets Manager in their potential for continued growth was not mere 'empire building' as the reports make clear; the revenue, the acceptance of increased rents, the continuing demand for accommodation and the volume of customers all support his contention that more could be made of this popular amenity. His enthusiasm was evidently shared by the Right Worshipful the Mayor, Alderman Miss Alice Arnold, who was a member of the Markets Committee in 1938 and took on its Chairmanship in 1939. It is also borne out by the sheer number and consistency of references to the market made by people living in the city at the time: 'We used to go straight down in the market'.<sup>71</sup> 'I used to go down in the market and I used to get a bit of material for sixpence'.<sup>72</sup> 'We used to go down to the market [on Saturday nights] and get what we

could there'.<sup>73</sup> 'We used to ... leave the children in the house, with friends to look after them, and we used to go to the market every Sat'day; and we used to get enough sweets for sixpence to last the children all week'.<sup>74</sup> 'We used to meet in town and do our shopping together. Around the market'.<sup>75</sup> 'I always used to go round the market and buy remnants. I used to go and buy [a] couple of dress remnants on Friday, come home and make them up over the weekend! Used to cost me next to nothing!'<sup>76</sup>

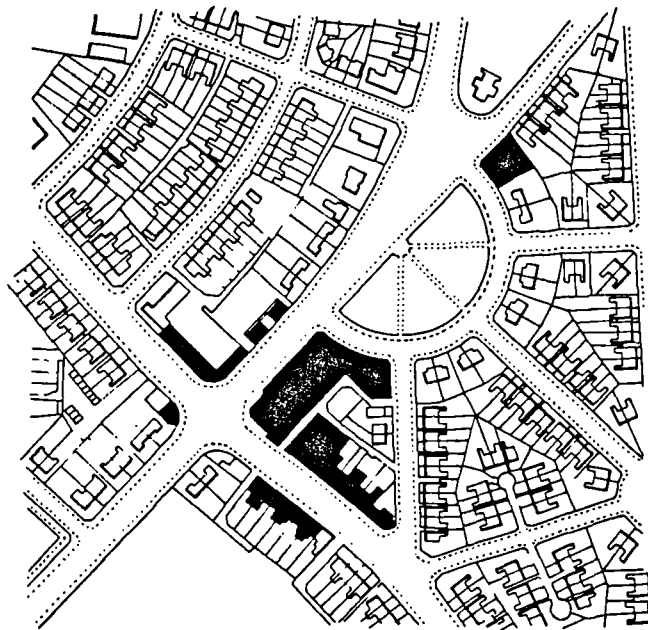
Although food and clothing were pre-eminent among the purchases mentioned, a glance down the list of stall holders even in the smaller of the two markets makes it clear that they could provide for most human needs, and these extended beyond the purely physical.<sup>77</sup> The availability of a broad range of goods at knockdown prices was only part of their appeal, as respondents make clear: 'I used to like the market because that was an entertainment, 'specially on Saturdays ... they used to keep open to ten at night. They'd auction all the sweets, and, meat and stuff like that'.<sup>78</sup> The market was a setting for sociability and socialization; friends met, at least some husbands and wives shopped together, and children in prams learned phrases like 'wash and wear well'.<sup>79</sup> It was convenient because of the diversity of stalls co-existing under one roof, and it was informal and friendly, completely lacking the rather strained protocol still evident in many shops. The lure of a bargain and the vibrancy of the market's atmosphere were a winning combination on any day of the week, but on Saturday nights the appeal was intensified by the urgency of the auction. While the disposal of fresh produce at the week's end was a needful activity, there seems little doubt that the auction formula was being more widely applied to allow scope for the showmanship of the individual stallholder: buttered brazils for instance, were hardly in need of quick clearance.<sup>80</sup> In so doing, a space was created in which men might participate in the shopping process without losing face: 'They used

to sell off all the things they hadn't sold ... they had to get rid of it. And the ordinary people would go down there and queue up and bid for it, and it was exciting, and the man took an active part in that'.<sup>81</sup> By no means all of the bidders, or the vendors, would have been men, but the qualities required to participate in the playing out of these small dramas - loudness, 'front', decisiveness, rough humour - made them ideally suited as arenas for the playing out of men's gendered roles. Although late night shopping on a Saturday had been a necessary expedient for poor working class families before the First World War, it was now re-configured as a leisure pursuit for many married couples who might formerly have spent Saturday nights dancing or going to the cinema.

In a series of articles published in the Midland Daily Telegraph between May and July 1936, a roving reporter went out with the aim of 'Exploring Greater Coventry's Expanding Suburbs'.<sup>82</sup> The reporter, with true investigative fervour, tried to find out what difficulties had been created by the dramatic speed of development, but was left with the impression that: 'Coventry is undoubtedly expanding into a city of happy homes and pretty suburbs, and it only needs a continuance of industrial prosperity to keep it such'.<sup>83</sup> There were problems: library facilities, play areas, road improvements, the preservation of areas of countryside were all mentioned; but all seemed on the verge of being solved.<sup>83</sup> Some already had: 'Grouses! There is hardly need to mention the word since the Barkers Butts side of the suburb was given a ten minute 'bus service by the Corporation'.<sup>84</sup> Recently improved public transport services had removed the most frequent cause of complaint. The suburbs were characterised in the articles as 'new satellite towns' or 'self-contained townships'; an understandable overstatement in view of their size. The Cheylesmore Housing Scheme, for instance, was estimated to have a final population of twenty thousand.<sup>85</sup> These terms were also current in contemporary town-planning debates



The rash of shops (dotted spaces) in a pre-1914 housing area.



SHOPS IN "1930" ESTATE.

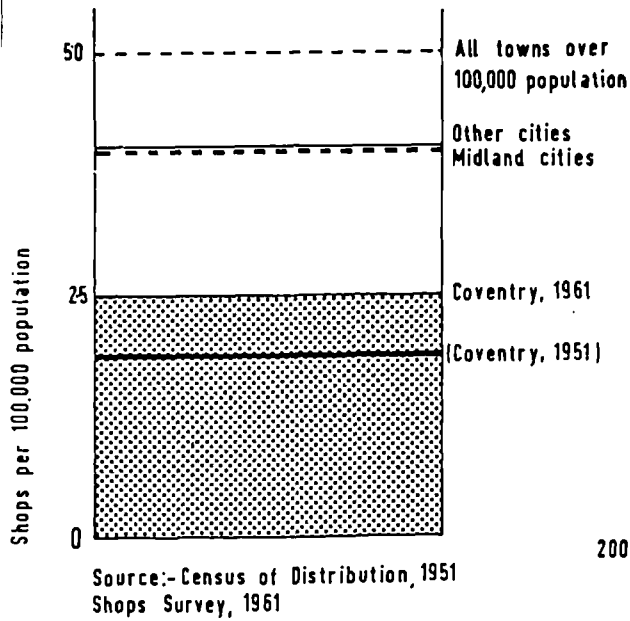
The distribution of shops. The top image is taken from Wilfred Burns, British Shopping Centres (1959). The image below is from the City of Coventry 'First Quinquennial Review of the Development Plan: Shopping in Coventry' (1964). The "1930" estate is Coundon.

drawing on the earlier Garden City ideal. This partly explains both the reporter's projection of the suburbs as planned locations with a full and independent range of services, and the occupants' firm conviction that such services would indeed be provided for them.

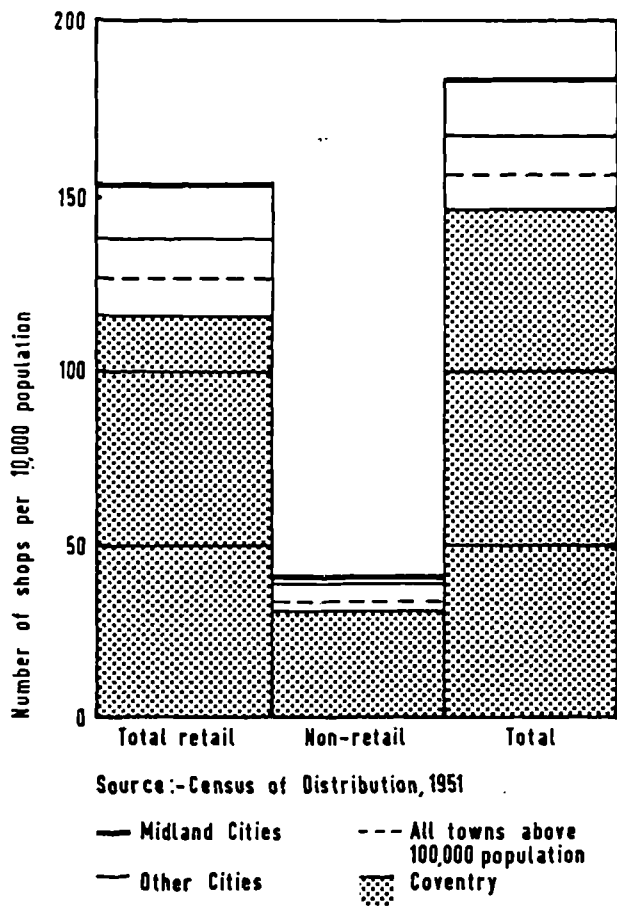
There was not a single mention of a lack of shopping facilities. In fact the provision of this kind of local amenity was given considerable prominence by the reporter using sub-headings like 'New Arcade of Shops' and photographs to accompany descriptions and locations given in the text.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the random distribution of many pre-First World War shops among ordinary terraced housing, themselves being mostly front room conversions, these inter-war shops were consciously designed to create high profile, localised shopping environments in which types of retailer were highly differentiated but clustered together for convenience. This made them good candidates for the sweeping lens of the photographer, and likewise ready assimilation by the newly resident shopper. The commentary on one area included the following statement.

In most instances the lay-out leaves little to be desired; wide road junctions, flanked by shops, makes nearly all the main road crossings shopping centres, so that in each instance self-contained communities are arising.<sup>27</sup>

When shops were so highly visible, it may not always have been easy to identify whether or not a lack was felt. But shopkeepers who had recently opened for business were reported as saying that although trade was 'good on the average', there was a tendency for residents to take a trip into the centre of the city at weekends.<sup>28</sup> The use of 'residents' rather than 'housewives' might be interpreted as meaning that husbands accompanied their wives on these expeditions. The oft-repeated plea for improved bus services also tends to support the contention that suburban dwellers were anxious to be able to escape their satellite townships at reasonably



1 COVENTRY AND COMPARABLE CITIES, NUMBER OF LARGE STORES.



2. COVENTRY AND COMPARABLE CITIES, RATIO OF SHOPS TO POPULATION.

Charts 1 and 2 show how poorly Coventry compared to other urban locations both in terms of large stores and ratio of shops to population. Taken from the City of Coventry 'First Quinquennial Review of the Development Plan: Shopping in Coventry' (1964). The "1930" estate is Coundon.



frequent intervals.

How well did the provision of these shopping sites accord with the needs of their users? In December 1949 fieldwork was begun on a sociological survey of Coventry commissioned by the City Council and carried out by the University of Birmingham. Its primary purpose was to assist in the post-war planning of the city, but the scope of the research yielded material which goes some way towards answering this question, and as it pre-dated large-scale reconstruction the people whose views were recorded are talking about essentially the same city as existed in 1939. Despite the assertion of one respondent that 'Old [pre-war] Coventry was a compact, happy town, with plenty of shops and very friendly', the research team noted that they found few of the amenities they expected in a city of the size, tradition and wealth of Coventry.<sup>89</sup> Charts 1 and 2 clearly demonstrate the shortfall in the city's retailing profile in the immediate post-war period, using information derived from the 1950 Census of Distribution. In terms of total numbers of shops, and large stores specifically, Coventry compared poorly with other cities, particularly other cities with a population of over 100,000. Despite the consistently high rankings on purchasing power indices given to the city throughout the period, it had only attracted one out of the country's five hundred or so department stores by 1939.<sup>90</sup> John Hayes's contribution to the Sociological Survey pinpointed a dramatic decline in the ratio of shops to people in the city's post-1932 inter-war estates. It dropped from below one hundred people per shop to approximately two hundred.<sup>91</sup> This would mainly have affected the provision of everyday food essentials.<sup>92</sup>

Movement in the numbers of non-grocery stores between 1931 and 1938, as reflected in the city's Street Directories, also tells a surprising story. Comparisons over the period are complicated by changes in classification and only give a very crude indication of more complex shifts

in retailing. They tell us nothing, for instance, about volumes of sales. Nevertheless the overall picture (in absolute terms) is a startling one of decline. In a period in which the population rose by some thirty-four per cent the numbers of tobacconists, confectioners, florists, glass and china dealers, hosiers and haberdashers, clothiers, drapers, dressmakers and costumiers, hatters and milliners declined significantly; that is between six and fifty per cent.<sup>93</sup> This must to some extent have been compensated for by the rise in gents outfitters (eighteen per cent), ladies outfitters (eighty per cent) and corsetieres (seventy-one per cent). The numbers of tailors, outfitters, boot dealers, musical instrument dealers, pianoforte warehouses, pram dealers and fancy goods dealers only stayed steady. The numbers of hardware dealers remained steady but the number of ironmongers rose by eleven per cent. Likewise the number of furniture dealers remained steady while the numbers of house furnishers rose by thirty-three per cent, in line with the population increase. The numbers of butchers rose precisely in line with the population although pork butchers declined. The twenty-six per cent rise in newsagents must reflect a move into the territory once occupied by tobacconists and confectioners. Other increases worth mentioning include chemists, although not in line with population increase, and jewellers who increased by a phenomenal sixty-six per cent. The picture presented by clothing retailers is particularly difficult to disentangle because of the varying descriptions used. However one distinction may usefully be made between shops catering for men and women. While men's tailored clothing was available from several well-known multiple stores namely two branches of Burtons, two branches of the Fifty Shilling Tailor, Donegal Tweed Company and Austin Reed, all centrally located, only seven out of eighty-three ladies 'outfitters' were in the town centre and none were national companies at all. If nothing else, these figures must indicate the growing dominance of the multiples with

their greater volume of sales (ladies outfitting excepted), otherwise Coventrians would be roaming the streets barefoot and ill-clad.

The other possible interpretation of the statistics is that multiples moved into the city well in advance of the population surge where they remained, over-capitalized and under-utilized, until the market caught up with them, but this seems unlikely.

*Ambience and convenience: Transport and traffic problems*

Coventry's first tramway service began operating between Bedworth and the city in the early 1880s and was extended and electrified in 1897. By 1911-12 however, it was clear that further significant development was needed and would best be obtained through public ownership; although true to the form outlined in the preceeding chapter, it took a public campaign orchestrated by Coventry Trades Council and the concerted effort of the first Labour member of the City Council (George Poole, elected 1905) to encourage the Corporation to exercise its option to purchase the privately-owned company.<sup>94</sup> Having been persuaded, the Council's decision in favour of acquisition was 'virtually unanimous', although repayment of the debt incurred would make heavy demands on earnings for the next thirty years.<sup>95</sup> In 1913 the Committee appointed to control the tramways recommended the promotion of a Parliamentary Bill to obtain the powers to establish a motor bus service. This made Coventry one of the first towns in the country to enhance its municipal passenger services in this way. From a position of apathy, the Corporation had swung to one of dynamism in a short space of time. The First World War impeded development of the bus service but by 1935 the transition was well underway. A fleet of ninety-five buses were by this time operating alongside fifty-five tramcars, carrying thirty-seven million fare-paying passengers throughout the city.<sup>96</sup> The following year the Council purchased the independent bus

# Coventry Transport

Serving a population of 215,000, operate

No. 1	Bedworth	....	Cov. Station	every 10 minutes
" 2	Longford	....	Broadgate	" 5 "
" 5	Bell Green	....	Cov. Station	" 10 "
" 6	Broad Street	....	Broadgate	" 5 "
" 8	Uxbridge Avenue	....	Broadgate	" 8 "

No. 1	Stoke Heath	....	Maudslay Road	every 10 min.
" 2	Green Lane	....	Radford	" 10 "
" 3	Stoke Aldermoor	....	Hen Lane	" 6 "
" 4	Stoke Heath	....	Coundon	" 10 "
" 5	Binley	....	Coundon	" 10 "
" 6	Lenton's Lane or Alderman's Green	....	Earlsdon	Hourly
" 6	Walsgrave	....	Earlsdon	every 10 min.
" 7	Allesley	....	Pool Meadow	" 12 "
" 8	Tile Hill	....	Pool Meadow	" 15 "
" 9	Broad Lane	....	Broadgate	" 20 "
" 10	Brownhill Green	....	Pool Meadow	" 30 "
" 11	Glendower Avenue	....	Pool Meadow	" 10 "
" 13	Willenhall	....	Pool Meadow	" 20 "
" 14	Inner Circle	....		" 30 "
" 16	Keresley	....	Pool Meadow	" 40 "
" 17	Baginton	....	Pool Meadow	" 40 "
" 18	Burton Green	....	Pool Meadow	Approx. hourly
" 19	Berkswell	....	Pool Meadow	Approx. every 2 hours

Subject to adjustment in accordance with traffic requirements.



City of Coventry Transport Services. Bus timetable reproduced from City of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (Coventry, 1937). The regularity of services is far in advance of anything available today.

services operating in the city and by 1937 could claim seventy-two miles of bus and tramway routes and put the number of passengers at 'forty odd million'.<sup>97</sup>

A breakdown of who these passengers were would be enormously interesting, but can only be speculated on. The figure is equivalent to approximately 180 journeys for every man, woman and child in the city, or more likely, one journey to and from work, six days a week for 64,000 employed persons. This would leave 75,000 employed people reliant on feet, cycles and cars. The development of suburbs close to the main outlying factory sites meant that many workers were well able to walk to work and return home at lunchtime, although the pressure on accomodation<sup>m</sup> meant that it wasn't always possible to secure a home in an area adjacent to your particular workplace. Cycle ownership was, of course, widespread in a city renowned for their manufacture and car ownership stood at double the national average at sixty-eight per thousand of the population by 1938.<sup>98</sup> Many of these cars would, however, have been reserved for weekend excursions rather than the short distances involved in daily commuting.

Despite the frequency of bus services offered (see schedule opposite) and the relatively low cost involved, many women seem to have adopted a rather puritanical attitude to this mode of transport: Mrs Ru, Mrs W, Mrs B and Mrs N all remember walking into town from outlying Stoke, Keresley and Whitley.<sup>99</sup> Mrs B only allowed herself the comfort of a 'tuppence ha'penny' bus ride on her return journey when laden with shopping. In any case, in a pre-buggy age many young housewives were compelled to give themselves and baby a breath of fresh air en route to town since prams could not be accomodated<sup>m</sup> on buses.

By the 1920s it was clear that local and through traffic was putting an intolerable strain on the city's arteries, for Coventry remained a key route-centre. Piecemeal road widening over the previous century had

proved wholly inadequate and had certainly never taken into account the needs of some shoppers for parking space or the increasing numbers of loading and unloading delivery vans. Now drastic measures were called for. The 1914 street improvement plan sponsored by Vincent Wyles has already been referred to: via a 1920 Act of Parliament and some detailed tinkering by the newly engaged City Engineer, Ernest Ford, this was made to produce a series of modifications to the central area, most notably the partial rebuilding of the Burges and Fleet Street in 1930 and 1931 respectively, and the construction of two new roads already mentioned, Corporation Street and Trinity Street in 1931 and 1937 respectively.

This gradually brought about some improvement for the motorist, but how did the pedestrian fare? As early as 1929 the City's Chief Constable was expressing concerns for their safety. 'With the present congestion of, and fast moving traffic in some of the City's streets, to cross on foot from one side to the other, requires considerable nerve on the part of children and aged and infirm people.'<sup>100</sup> Accident statistics are difficult to break down, but at least 152 road accidents happened in central Coventry in 1931.<sup>101</sup> Both Hertford Street and Smithford Street averaged more than two dozen accidents a year between 1931 and 1935; and between 1935 and 1938 the total of all road accidents went up by thirty per cent.<sup>102</sup> They were more likely to happen between the hours of ten and two, and on Saturdays.<sup>103</sup> In 1934 the Chief Constable recorded the view that: 'Much public attention has been directed to the very heavy road casualties, and rightly so: the problem is as important, if not more important than crime, and no real solution has so far been found'.<sup>104</sup> As human injury seemed to count for rather less than crime statistics, it should come as no surprise that having to devote police time to preventing thoughtless parking from clogging up the streets, drove the Chief Constable to distraction. In 1930 he was able to announce that two

municipal car parks had been established which were expected to lessen the problem, and in 1931 a unilateral system of parking was helping the situation in Hertford Street and High Street; although people were still abusing the short-stay facility by staying for longer than was intended.<sup>105</sup> The City's Official Guide for 1937 gave the number of parking places in Pool Meadow as two hundred and eighty.<sup>106</sup>

Concurrent with this, attention was being given to the idea of keeping traffic away from the city centre altogether unless it was specifically destined for it. Warwickshire County Council had originally informed Coventry City Council that the Ministry of Transport favoured the idea of a bypass to the south of the city in 1924. Control of the land on which the six miles of dual carriageway would be built passed to the City Council in 1928 and in 1930 the requisite Act of Parliament was achieved. Economic imperatives forced by the Depression meant that progress was slow, and it wasn't until 1939 that traffic passing from London to Birmingham and the North West remained isolated from the city centre. For most of the 1930s, then, high levels of traffic, of accidents, and of obstructive parking made the central area a less than ideal environment to browse around. This was compounded by the noise, dirt and inconvenience caused by fairly consistent amounts of demolition and rebuilding work throughout the period.

## *Footnotes to Chapter Two*

1. J. Prest, The Industrial Revolution in Coventry (1960), pp.39-41.
2. Prest, Industrial Revolution in Coventry, p.25.
3. Prest, Industrial Revolution in Coventry, p.24.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. University of London, Institute of Historical Research, Victoria History of the Counties of England: Warwick (multiple volumes), vol. 8 (1969), p.28.
7. Victoria, p.11. The Quadrant was completed in 1863.
8. City of Coventry, 'First Quinquennial Review of the Development Plan: Shopping in Coventry'. Report DPR34 prepared by Arthur Ling, April 1964, p.18; Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.303.
9. Prest, Industrial Revolution, p.25.
10. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.9.
11. Prest, Industrial Revolution, p.41.
12. Prest, Industrial Revolution, p.41-42.
13. F. Smith, Coventry: Six Hundred Years of Municipal Life (1945), p.129.
14. The second Act came in 1875. Gladstone is conventionally credited with striking the death blow to the ribbon industry when he removed the protective duty on foreign imports in that year. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.9 and p.11.
15. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.238.
16. Lancaster and Mason in Life and Labour, p.342.
17. D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly, 'Coventry's industrial economy, 1880-1980' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.19.
18. M. Winstanley, The Shopkeeper's World, 1830-1914 (1983), p.34.
19. In 1891 they numbered 3,566; less than seven per cent of the city's population. See: B. Lancaster, 'Who's a real Coventry kid?' in Lancaster



- and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.58.
20. Winstanley, Shopkeeper's World, p.39.
  21. Winstanley, Shopkeeper's World, p.46.
  22. Winstanley, Shopkeeper's World, p.101.
  23. See Smith, Six Hundred Years, p.165.
  24. F. Thompson Lark Rise to Candleford pp.418-419 and p.423.
  25. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.185.
  26. Census figures quoted in Lancaster, 'Coventry Kid' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.60 and p.66; N. Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics, Coventry 1945-1960 (1990), p.7.
  27. Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.346.
  28. Victoria, p.291.
  29. F. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism,' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p. 175.
  30. City of Coventry, Coventry Official Handbook (1933).
  31. See for instance Victoria, p.12.
  32. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.294n.
  33. J. B. Priestley, English Journey (1934), p.69.
  34. Advertisement in Coventry Official Handbook (1933), p.10.
  35. Articles about the Co-operative movement appeared frequently in the journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce. See Jan/Feb 1930, Nov/Dec 1931, March/April 1932, May/June 1933, Jul/Aug 1936 and Sept/Oct 1937.
  36. City of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.52.
  37. Ibid.
  38. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ending 31 March 1938'.
  39. City of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.52.
  40. Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.346.
  41. Crossman in Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, p.xvi.

42. Midland Daily Telegraph 27 Jan. 1937.
43. Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, p.140.
44. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.180.
45. Crossman in Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, p.xxvii. His reply is not recorded.
46. Coventry City Council, City of Coventry Official Guide (1930).
47. This and subsequent quotations *ibid*.
48. Winstanley, Shopkeeper's World, p 41.
49. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.302.
50. Coventry City Council, City of Coventry Official Guide (1930), p.166.
51. City of Coventry, Shopping in Coventry, p.3.
52. F. Andrew, 'History of Coventry Chamber of Commerce and Industry, 1903-1978' (photocopied typescript, n.d., 1979?), unpaginated. City of Coventry, 'Minutes of the Planning Committee', (volume including 1933), p.134. Meeting held 4th October 1933.
53. Midland Daily Telegraph, 3 March 1933.
54. M. Stacey, Tradition and Change, (1960) p.30.
55. Stacey, Tradition and Change, p.21-23.
56. Stacey, Tradition and Change, p.27
57. Stacey, Tradition and Change, p.31 and p.168.
58. Coventry City Council, City of Coventry Official Handbook (1933).
59. Priestley, English Journey, p.68.
60. Corporation of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.33.
61. *Ibid*.
62. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1938'. I cannot definitely identify the two stores; Owen Owen seems an unlikely 'competitor' to the market.
63. Corporation of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.52.

64. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1938'.
65. Ibid.
66. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1938', and 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1939'.
67. Corporation of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.52.
68. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1939'.
69. City of Coventry, 'Report on the Markets Undertakings for the year ended 31 March 1939'.
70. Transcript of interview, Mrs. W,
71. Transcript of interview, Mrs. W.
72. Transcript of interview, Mrs. W.
73. Transcript of interview, Mrs. W.
74. Transcript of interview, Mrs. R.
75. Transcript of interview, Mrs. R.
76. In 1937 the Market Hall stalls offered besides fruit, vegetables and flowers: confectionery, hosiery, fancy goods, hardware, books, drapery, haberdashery, outfits, tools, a music dealer and a music teacher. Coventry Street Directory, 1937-38.
77. Transcript of interview, Mrs. R.
78. Transcript of interview, Mrs. R's daughter.
79. Transcript of interview, Mrs. R.
80. Transcript of interview, Mrs. L.
81. Midland Daily Telegraph The articles have been compiled in a scrapbook: the first is undated, but would be from c. 11 May 1936.
82. Ibid.
83. The remaining articles were published on 18 May 1936, 26 May 1936, 3

June 1936, 10 June 1936, 17 June 1936, 24 June 1936, 10 July 1936 and 15 July 1936.

84. Midland Daily Telegraph, 18 May 1936.

85. Midland Daily Telegraph, 15 July 1936.

86. There were photographs of the shops in Coundon, Stoke, Hen Lane and Cheylesmore.

87. Midland Daily Telegraph, 24 June 1936.

88. Ibid.

89. L. Kuper (ed), Living in Towns (1953), p.37; City of Coventry, Planning and Redevelopment Committee, 'Report of the Sociological Survey Team' (typescript), p.7.

90. J. B. Jefferys, Retail Trading in Britain, 1850-1950 (Cambridge, 1954), p.59.

91. City of Coventry. Planning and Redevelopment Committee, 'Report of the Sociological Survey Team' (typescript), p.97

92. The research identified that these were the items most commonly bought locally.

93. Figures derived from listings in Coventry Street Directory, 1930-31 and Coventry Street Directory, 1937-38.

94. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.191 and p.194.

95. Smith, Six Hundred Years, p.155.

96. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.218.

97. Victoria, p.298; Corporation of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.5.

98. Richardson, Twentieth Century, p.278.

99. Transcriptions of interviews with Mrs. R, Mrs. B, Mrs. W and Mrs. N.

100. City of Coventry, 'Report of the Chief Constable for the year ended 31 December 1929', p.11.

101. City of Coventry, 'Report of the Chief Constable for the year ended 31

December 1931'.

102. City of Coventry, 'Reports of the Chief Constable' for the years ending 31 December 1931, 1932, 1933, 1934 and 1935; Chief Constable's 'Report' for 1938 summarised in Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, p.7.

103. City of Coventry, 'Report of the Chief Constable for the year ended 31 December 1934', p.12.

104. City of Coventry, 'Reports of the Chief Constable for the years ending 31 December 1930 and 1931', p. 9 and p. 12 respectively.

105. Corporation of Coventry, Coventry Official Guide (1937), p.5.

106. Information taken from: City of Coventry, Directory of Coventry Manufacturers, 1936-37 (1936); and City of Coventry, Directory of Coventry Manufacturers, 1938-39 (1938).

**CHAPER THREE**

***Routes and 'Roots':  
Introducing the Subjects***

As the name of this chapter suggests, its primary purpose is to introduce formally the subjects whose life experiences are represented within this thesis. Among other things, it describes the ways in which newcomers to the city came to Coventry (routes), and the kinds and locations of families they grew up in (roots). It cannot in any sense do justice to the wealth of detail gathered during interviews in which complex personal/social identities were conveyed to the author, and does not replicate more than the tiniest fraction of material generated in this way. It aims only to draw out a selection of salient facts, relevant to the nature of the thesis, and reflects to some extent the territories of enquiry mapped out by previous historians of working-class culture, labour history, 'the family', and women. Family history alone has generated a vast literature over a period of almost forty years, and no attempt will be made here to summarise the current 'state of the art', beyond the statement that a simple linear progression from 'pre-industrial' to 'post-industrial' family types has long since been abandoned and, with respect to the focus of the present study, historians no longer believe all working-class families relate to the wider community in the same way that Willmott and Young's Bethnal Green subjects did.<sup>1</sup> Bare bones, then, are all that are provided here with the aim of personalising and contextualising some of the foregoing discussion.

The thesis examines men's and women's interaction (or lack of interaction) as partners in furnishing a shared space in which to carry out the domestic functions of their lives during a particular decade (1930s), in a particular place (Coventry). It does this as a means of identifying and analysing the processes of shopping during a period in which technological and economic advances theoretically allowed increased access to a widening range of non-essential goods. Within this chapter, attention is therefore focused on the economic circumstances of subjects' young

adulthood; the processes of finding, approving and securing a marriage partner; and subsequent employment patterns. As family size clearly had an impact on levels of disposable income, data is also presented about the numbers of children born to these couples. Information on education and church attendance is included to give a sense of individuals' susceptibility to wider cultural influences being brought to bear on their personal development, ie. if we accept that the Church stood broadly against materialism, and educationalists were generally attempting to inculcate habits of rational (that is longterm, non-credit dependant) money management, then these individuals were in the places where those messages were being conveyed. No more is inferred than that.

It is not suggested that subjects' early experiences in any way singled them out from their peer group, or affected their assimilation of the broader cultural influences experienced by the rest of their generation: rather they were in many ways typical of 'norms' of family experience in so far as they have been identified for the period under review. If there is a distinctive feature which marks them out and suggests a typology for later 'consumer-success' in Coventry it is aptitude for, though not often access to, further education beyond the public elementary schools they mostly attended.

It also seems appropriate at this juncture to disclose the 'routes and roots' which brought me into contact with the respondents in this study. They were located in a variety of ways, facilitated by my longterm residence in Coventry. One responded to a letter in a local newspaper, another was identified through a printed letter of their own. Old school associates, former work colleagues, and friends made suggestions and initiated contacts. These then sometimes led in turn to other respondents. Two of the subjects were family members of the author, none of the others were previously known. Descriptions given to 'intermediaries' of



characteristics of likely candidates for interview were very broad; being married or courting before or during the 1930s, moving to or living in Coventry during the same period, and being in work for most of that time. It was only possible to interview both marriage partners in three instances. After initial contact had been established by letter then phone, and visit, and the purpose of the research explained, no-one declined further involvement in the interviewing process.<sup>2</sup> Respondents were promised anonymity; where names occur they are from printed sources in the public domain.

Two unpublished and several published pieces of autobiographical writing are also drawn on; one author and his wife were subsequently interviewed. Use is also made of oral testimony from the collection of interviews with car workers and their families carried out by Linda Grant and Paul Thompson in Coventry which are held in the Coventry Record Office. In all, significant life history material is presented for two dozen individuals. In no way does this constitute a statistically valid 'sample' in the sociological sense: willing and able interviewees in their eighties are obviously a numerically declining resource. Nevertheless, their selection was relatively random and their experiences are diverse enough to provide valuable insights into the subject under scrutiny.

I hope that by means of this early 'introduction' it may be possible for readers to follow distinctive traits of individuals' responses to the material conditions of their lives in Coventry in the 1930s through the chapters which follow.<sup>3</sup>

### *Routes and 'roots'*

Great stress is laid throughout this thesis on the impact of inward migration to Coventry's development during this period. No single area constituted a traditional source of incomers for the city; instead people

were drawn from the whole length and breadth of the country, as well as a small number from the continent. This is perhaps unsurprising given Coventry's central location. The relative importance of different source areas changed over time in response to trade fluctuations in the local industries of those areas. It is unnecessary to enumerate these variations here; what must be stressed is the great diversity of Coventry people's geographical origins, and the fusion of regional identities which Coventry's inter-war society represented. Tables IV, V and VI provide information for comparative purposes on the scale and scope of these migratory flows into the city during the first forty years of this century. Table IV shows the former place of residence of those subjects of this study who were not born locally. Table V shows data from a 1939 study of national insurance books surrendered in Coventry and therefore relates only to the insured part of the local population. Table VI uses information gathered in the Population Census of 1911 which asked questions about birthplace that were omitted from later Censuses.

Table IV. Geographical origins of subjects born outside Coventry

Mrs N	Wolverhampton
Mr G	Grantham in Lincolnshire
Mrs G	Dorset
Mr and Mrs Ru	Southend
Mr and Mrs W	Jarrow
Mr Ro	Pontypool
Mr and Mrs B	Lichfield
Jane and Charlie Walsh	Oldham
Mr and Mrs T	Manchester
Mr and Mrs X	Warwick
Mr and Mrs F	Burslem

Table V. Birthplace of Insured Migrant Population in 1939

%	
3.1	Leicester - Hinckley District
- -	Birmingham (assumed to be daily travellers)
3.95	Black Country
2.25	Northants
1.9	Potteries
2.15	Nottingham - Derby District
7.6	Greater London (1931 Census area)
1.65	Sheffield and District
16.85	Manchester and Cotton Area
4	Merseyside
9.25	Cardiff - Newport District
2.45	Yorks (Textiles)
1.1	Swansea - Llanelly District
4	Tyneside
0.95	Teeside
6.5	Clydeside
3.05	Other Coal Areas
29.6	Rest of UK
-----	
100	Total

Source: Adapted from O.G. Pickard, Midland Immigrations reproduced in A. Shenfield and P. Sargent Florence, 'Labour for the War Industries: The experience of Coventry', Review of Economic Studies, Vol XII (1944-45), pp.31-49.

Table VI. Birthplace of Coventry Citizens from 1911 Census Reports

2,846	London
1,184	South East
1,168	South West
4,268	South Midlands
1,186	Eastern Counties
81,097	West Midlands inc. Coventry
4,796	North Midlands
2,977	North West
1,607	Yorkshire
1,161	Northern Counties
525	Wales
702	Scotland
620	Ireland
465	Foreign

Source: B. Lancaster, 'Who's a real Coventry kid? Migration into Twentieth-Century Coventry' in B. Lancaster and T. Mason (eds), Life and Labour in a Twentieth-Century City: The Experience of Coventry (Coventry, ND, 1986?), p.63.

Although there were undoubtedly some enclaves of people with a shared regional identity within the city, most people's experience approximated more closely to this description of street occupancy given by George Stockford:

When we were growing up it was a complete cosmopolitan area ....  
Just going up from our house there was old Coventrians next door.  
The people next door come from the North. The people next door  
come from Liverpool. The people next door to them came from  
Lancashire, Blackpool. The people next door to them were Irish,



**Your new  
factory—  
give it room  
to expand!**

## COME TO COVENTRY

**T**HERE is no congestion in the Coventry Industrial area. Exceptionally fine factory sites are available at low rents. Raw materials are also to hand, transport arrangements are splendid and there are fine residential facilities for employees.

We will gladly help manufacturers in selecting sites to suit their needs.

**WRITE:—  
DEVELOPMENT OFFICER,  
Council House, COVENTRY**

Come to Coventry. Advertisement placed by Coventry's Development Officer in the journal of the city's Chamber of Commerce which appeared in more or less the same format throughout the 1930s.

and there were Irish again; there were Scotch next door to them. And going back the other way again, they were Reading people; the next lot came from Scotland. The next lot come from Derbyshire, the others I don't know where, the next one was a Dutchman come from Holland. They were a complete mixture.<sup>4</sup>

The City Corporation promoted Coventry's potential as a site for industrialists wishing to relocate or expand their manufacturing capacity. Notices like the one opposite appeared in the journal of the local Chamber of Commerce throughout the period, and a similar message was relayed through a number of publications devised by the City's Development Officer with the prompting of the Chamber, which were widely distributed both in this country and abroad. The Corporation does not seem to have concerned itself at this date (early to mid-1930s) with the task of attracting individuals into the city to work in these new concerns. Although some male migrants to Coventry undoubtedly responded to advertisements placed in their local press by manufacturers based in the city, this was only true of one of the subjects of this study (Mr X). Most of them were drawn like Fred Sutton, founder of Sutton's Bakeries, because they heard Coventry was 'a growing city', or because a friend or relative had gone before them and found the move to have been beneficial.<sup>5</sup>

When Jane Walsh's husband hitched a lift from Oldham to Coventry in a furniture van driven by an acquaintance, he was following the route taken by his best friend shortly before. Mr Taylor (snr) took twelve hours to cycle the hundred miles from Manchester to Coventry through Congleton, Stoke-on-Trent, Stone, Lichfield and Coleshill after discussions with the Coventry-based cousin of his fiancée's best friend. Mrs Ro's husband walked with his brother from their home in Wales. Mr and Mrs W followed her sister, and Mr and Mrs Ru followed his brother. Mr B first came to the city from Lichfield to work for a man with a shop in both places but

was laid off during a period of poor trade. On a trip to see old workmates he paid a judicious visit to the offices of the Prudential and expressed an interest in working with figures. The only other man to relocate with a known job waiting for him was Mr G, who was prevented by custom and practice from joining the police force on his home territory. Mrs G was the only woman in the group who moved to Coventry independently of a fiance or husband, but her destination was the home of an uncle of her mother's. Mr X followed his estranged mother to Coventry from Leamington.

### *Tales of poverty and orphanhood*

Although information on this subject is by no means complete, it is clear from what there is that the experience of losing a parent during childhood or early adulthood was a common one within this group, so that very few couples embarked on marriage with a full set of in-laws. Mr J, Mr Ru, Mr 33, Mrs B and Mrs Y had lost their fathers. (Mrs Y's four aunts were all widowed too). Mrs N had lost both her natural father and been deserted by her stepfather. Mrs W had lost both parents; Mr W had lost his mother; and Mr X was raised by his grandparents. Mr Taylor (snr) lost his father, and Mrs Ru and Mrs N their mothers in early adulthood.

All respondents without exception told 'tales of poverty' when describing the circumstances in which they grew up. Although there were undoubtedly variations in the precise economic situations of the different families, with some enduring much more harsh material privation than others, or for longer than others, these subjects' narratives included similar and sometimes conventionalised motifs, and their conception of themselves was as children of parents who struggled. A small sample of representative comments are included here as illustration, but cannot do

justice to the many and complex facets of identities constructed over several hours of interviewing.

Mrs 2 said that 'Mum used to stand on the steps waiting for my dad to come home to have a penny for the gas'; Mrs 33 that 'my mother rattled the plates in the pantry so that people would think we had a meal'; and Mr X that 'The only thrill I got on a birthday, the headmaster used to give us a penny'. Some subjects provided environmental clues to their circumstances. Jane Walsh wrote that her family 'lived in a Lancashire cotton town - and when you add that we lived in that town's slummiest and dirtiest quarter you are saying something!'.<sup>5</sup> Mrs N described how her family 'went to live in a wooden hut, and the water used to run down inside the walls, so every night we dragged ... the mattresses round this fire, you know, with the pipe going up'. Others referred to family composition: 'there were nine of we altogether, and I was the youngest of nine. And my mother brought us up working in the shop'. Some subjects referred to parents' money management skills: Mrs Ru said that hers 'couldn't afford to be otherwise [than thrifty]. 'Cause money was tight those days'. The other common features were paucity of clothing and lack of access to services. Mr 32 missed school for five months because he had no boots and 'the behind was out of [his] trousers'; later on he ran alongside the trams which carried his mates to save the penny fare.

### ***Church***

The Church played a role in the overwhelming majority of subjects' lives. Nearly all were sent as children to Sunday school, but many shared the view of Mr 32 that 'Part of it was to get us out the way'. Even in those homes with the most elaborate attendance rituals for the younger members of the family, the parents could not be assumed to be churchgoers themselves. Mrs 2 described how she and her siblings 'had to go to church



Sunday. If it wasn't Communion at 8 o'clock we used to have to go to the 10 o'clock service and then we'd have to go again in the afternoon and again at night. Every Sunday that was.' All three sisters did this until marriage but their parents never went. The suspicion quickly arises that the tradition of Sunday observance was as much about guaranteeing rest as it was about religious devotion. As Mrs 2 went on to explain:

They didn't go themselves. But it was - you're not allowed to do this because it's Sunday ... We used to have to sit on a Sunday afternoon, my father used to go to sleep and snore his head off. And mother would go to sleep. We used to have to sit there. We weren't allowed to read a paper, we weren't allowed to sew or knit or anything.

Mrs 33 concurred in this view: 'Nobody would ever wash on a Sunday, and if I wash anything through on a Sunday, I've still got a guilty feeling today ... During one period we couldn't even use the scissors on a Sunday'.

Despite the element of coercion evident in Mrs Ro's statement that: '[My brother] and I used to go to Sunday school. And we used to have our card stamped you see and a little text we used to have, every Sunday. And they knew if we hadn't been to church, if we hadn't been. They knew', Sunday school was generally welcomed as a route to other more varied delights such as summer outings. Mr X stated that 'Sunday school was optional but nearly everybody went because of the annual Sunday school treat, that was the attraction you know'.

Church constituted an extremely significant focal point for social activity among adolescents and young adults. For Mrs Y confirmation brought her Sunday school attendance to a natural close and she graduated as a teenager to Bible classes. At the same time other opportunities became available:

I used to keep fit then, I belonged to a gymnasium with two of my cousins so that made me more friends and that spent another evening out, and then as I got older we used to go to a dance, ... mostly they were at the church halls ... I belonged to All Saints Church and ... they used to have a dance there.

She confirmed that the gymnasium class she went to was run through either the Church or Chapel, as 'most of them used to be run, be attached to a Church or Chapel'. Mrs J also described her developing social life by reference to the church she attended.

Church made young people visible in a way that was useful to them. Mrs 33 first spotted her future husband as he was listening to a 'Church Crusade' outside his Church, while Mrs A found her first job through a church contact. Not having access to church or Sunday school was generally a cause for regret. Mrs N recounted how she and her sister were not able to mix with colleagues outside work because:

I only had one frock ... and we used to hear all our friends laughing and joking the boys and the girls together, go past our little wooden shack up to the church, and we couldn't go. We were swinging on the damson tree waiting for the only frock we'd got to dry.

Mrs 33 felt compelled to stop going to Sunday school because of the discrepancy between what happened when she went afterwards to the home of her friend 'who was rather nice', and what happened when the friend came home with her. She had been responsible from the age of ten for cooking the Sunday dinner so that her mother and father could go out together to the pub. 'I know it would have changed my life if I'd have stayed there, I should probably have had real belief, which I haven't got, but I'm sure I would have done, and it's one of the things I regret.'

Absence from church could create both a spiritual and a social void. The majority of subjects who attended as young people acquired a set of

social values and absorbed a Christian moral framework, but few became religious in a formal, strictly denominational way. For Mrs Y religion 'meant a safeguard to me, as a child ... it gave me a lot of comfort', whilst Mrs 2 described her attempts to mollify an all-seeing God:

I used to have a fixed idea in my mind, you know, of someone standing there watching you all the while. I used to think if I'd done anything wrong, you know, "Oh dear me, I wonder if he's put it in his book". So I used to pray a bit harder at night when I went to bed.

There was something fluid and unfocused about this religious adherence. Mr 32 reported that although his parents considered themselves 'Church of England', the Sunday school he and his siblings attended was Wesleyan. And there were numerous instances of courting couples making decisions about which church to attend on purely pragmatic grounds. Although Mrs Y's father had been Superintendent of a Chapel Sunday school, he subsequently married in his wife's church. Mrs Y's husband-to-be was also 'Chapel' and yet married in Church and eventually 'got confirmed and came to church with the children. Previously he used to come to Church with me in the morning and I go to Chapel in the evening'. Mrs J said to her intended when they 'were serious' that they 'must be together in church life'. He declined to come to her Congregational church so she said, 'Ok I will come to you'. When I queried whether this was a difficult decision for her to make she replied in the negative: 'No, oh no. Because although I used to [do] quite a bit at the Congregational, my faith ... was the same there as it was anywhere else, you see. There was no really, worry about it at all'. Mr T (jnr) also had experience of this process of religious realignment:

I often heard my parents claim they met at Methodist chapel, but they also attended the local Church of England, St. Jerome's,

where they married. Perhaps their motives were similar to my friends and me, when some thirty years later, we varied our religious convictions to please the current girlfriend's desires, or to take part in a drama club play.<sup>7</sup>

For both the Y's and the J's, proximity to a particular church was stated to be an important factor in choosing which home to buy after marriage. Mrs Y joined the Mothers' Union and the Women's Fellowship and both couples continued to be involved in all aspects of church life up to and including Church Council. But this level of involvement in church matters up to the present day was unusual for this sample. The normal pattern was for couples to stop attending church after setting up home together, and to send their own children to Sunday school in due course.

### *Education*

This group is characteristically made up of people who showed promise at school but whose parents did not necessarily recognise the value of secondary education, or more frequently were unable to find the resources to allow the take-up of offered places. Five subjects, two male and three female, were definitely offered places in secondary education. Two more men may be assumed to have been from their partners' accounts (Mrs 33's comment is quoted below and Mr N was said to have learnt Latin at school).

Mr Taylor (snr) won a scholarship to Manchester Grammar School at the age of ten, but despite the pleas of his teacher his parents remained unmoved, in view of the income he could generate on leaving school at thirteen. Mrs 33 took the grammar school entrance exam for Stoke Park in Coventry. Her father:

took me into the front room when this letter came and he said,  
now you know you can't go, I'd love you to go, where are we

going to get the money from to buy your books? ... [A]nd I wasn't upset or hurt, because I knew it was true. I knew that he would have let me go if he could, and I couldn't bear to make life worse for him.

Ironically Mrs 33 was disadvantaged by her mother's earlier experience of being enabled to attend a 'posh' school through the sponsorship of Cash's of Coventry. The stigma of being a 'charity child' and of having to attend school at some point with her head shaved (presumably as a result of treatment for head lice), seemed to have contributed to the psychological problems which beset her during Mrs 33's childhood. Although a local charity would have paid for 'clothes and whatnot', mention of the word charity was enough to distress her mother very greatly, and so was not an option they felt able to take up.

Mrs Y felt that 'if he'd been born into a wealthy family, [her father] would have been able to have been a boy that could've got on to higher education'. Her father became ill when she was twelve and died of cancer when she was fifteen and he forty-one. Although there were 'always books in the house' she felt that her mother 'didn't ever particularly want me to be very clever: she wanted me to be good, honest'. Mrs Y finished school at fourteen. She felt that the most important qualities stressed there were 'obedience and cleanliness'. In her own words:

They got a Coventry Grammar School for girls open ... and I was offered a place there, but by that time my father was very ill, so my mother said no, I couldn't go, because that meant staying to sixth year, and she was afraid I wouldn't be able to, you see.

Nevertheless, her employers were sufficiently impressed with her ability that they took the (for them) unusual step of paying for her attendance at Technical College evening classes. Her next employer offered her the opportunity of being one of only two designers they sent to Australia to

start up an operation over there: one she felt unable to accept because of family commitments.

Mrs N at least had the opportunity to start her secondary education, midway through family circumstances intervened:

I had my education in Wolverhampton, I went to Wolverhampton Technical High and then we came back to Coventry and I was going to continue because I mean you were really somebody if you went to school 'til you were sixteen and I was fifteen and a half when we came back ... and then my wicked stepfather ran away and left us and I had to go to work. I wanted to be a dispenser, I was doing my Latin and heaven knows what ... And so I went to work in this little weaving factory.

In Mr B's case it was he who was determined not to go on to grammar school because of the social composition of the school's intake:

The headmaster at the local school I went to he almost swore at me for being such a fool not to go to grammar school and of course father supported him and I said "now look dad there is a reason I'm not going", and the reason was ... we lived in a cottage at the gates of the grammar school and I thought this would be too awful for words and I couldn't face it. There was an awful lot of titled people lived in Lichfield and the grammar school boys of Lichfield unlike lots of others - different to Coventry - they were very [superior].

Two other subjects not given the opportunity to sit entrance exams, gave extraordinarily similar accounts of their final years in school from which it seems clear they were able candidates. Both had evidently completed the elementary school curriculum ahead of time, and spent a wasted year before being legally allowed to leave at thirteen. Mr X passed the exams after each of the seven school standards and in his last

year (X7) had no lessons. 'I used to weed and hoe and do the Head's garden ... and mix the paints for the paint lessons, sharpen the pencils with a penknife and all that lark. I used to feed and clean out his fowl..'

Mrs Ru said:

I'd been in X7 for two years. Apparently I was very smart at school, and they couldn't teach me any more, and my father heard about the Labour exam. And so, although I didn't want to leave school, I loved school, I was made to sit this exam which I passed, and I was able to leave school at thirteen.

Both Mr 32 and Mrs J were middle rank school achievers, held back by a lack of ability in arithmetic. This soured Mr 32's whole school experience, but seems to have acted as a goad in adult life when, despite being deprived of the opportunity of an apprenticeship because it only brought in five bob a week instead of 11/9d, he quickly rose to chargehand and was about to set up on his own account when war forced a delay. Both he and Mr X were enjoying reading widely and voraciously in their retirement, rounding out their education at last: 'It's second nature you know, all this ... reading. I'm a terrific reader. I don't dote on any particular thing, I read astronomy, philosophy, the sciences and also a western and a love story. You know, I can read anything really' (Mr X). Mr T 'completed his sparse education at night school and by correspondence course' according to his son, both of these becoming increasingly common in the period.<sup>2</sup> Mr G learnt cost accountancy by correspondence course after being invalided out of the police force in the early forties. Mr J left Centaur Road public elementary school, a school that was operating a 'higher tops' course of advanced instruction with a record of high attainment at the time he was there, and studied chartered accountancy at Coventry Technical College.<sup>3</sup> Mr N represented the typical self-educator, teaching himself radio and television theory and German whilst he was

courting.

As a substitute for her missed grammar opportunity Mrs 33 learnt shorthand and typing from the age of twelve. 'When me dad realised I couldn't go to this school, ... well I guess he thought, we'd love to do something for her and that's what they did'. Daughters seemed to be offered secretarial training by way of compensation; Mrs Ru and Mrs J both took this route, as did Mr X's daughter in due course. It was clearly a source of regret to Mr X that he 'couldn't do much for [the children] in the way of further education or anything like that. We were hamstrung that way.' His daughter was enabled to take her 'two years technical course' by a scholarship and went on to a secretarial career.

Of the next generation - this group's children - a high proportion did go on to further or higher education, although the Second World War interrupted the school careers of the children of the older parents among them. This quotation from Mrs 33 reflects the different aspirations, or greater determination to do right by children, that was a feature of this group:

[W]e wanted to know what they did at school, that was the chief thing, education first, oh yes. Honestly, we were education mad. For our children ... mainly because we both missed out. I mean, I had three of them at grammar school, and not a ha'penny coming in apart from what he was earning, so believe me, you did have to make shirts and dresses.

*Something about them: Partners' qualities*

It proved extremely difficult to establish on what basis women subjects decided they had 'met the right man', although I made a particular point of trying to ascertain this in interviews. The psychology of human attraction is of course a mysterious and impenetrable subject at the best



of times, but it seemed worthwhile making the attempt to find out what criteria, if any, women were employing to gauge a boyfriend's suitability for marriage because so much depended on it from their point of view. The situation of economic dependency a woman entered into on marriage made her peculiarly vulnerable: although a husband was equally likely to find his wife unlike his expectations, he was less likely to suffer severe economic privation as a result.

There was, however, no verbal confirmation for my feeling that financial considerations must have played *some* part in the process of weighing-up. Men were married whose earning capacity was limited, who seemed inept with money, and whose prospects were not especially good. The only woman courting a man who was an auspiciously good saver (Mrs B) told him that he needn't tell her what these savings amounted to, even as he was about to. The closest thing to the mention of money came with Mrs F's admission that: 'I didn't know that he backed horses when I married him, now I think that might have turned me off'.

I think there are three possible explanations for my failure to elicit clearer information on an evaluation so important that it must have taken place. Firstly, I was unable to devote the amount of interview time needed to do justice to the complexities of the question. Secondly, the subject of a man's 'worth' is possibly so big as to be invisible, or, more accurately, so obvious that it doesn't merit a mention. Thirdly, the economic uncertainties of the period had wrought a kind of fatalism: the experience of unemployment or underemployment was so commonplace that women focused less on a man's present circumstances than on his apparent willingness to work hard if ever he was given the opportunity.

Men's actual earnings are dealt with in the following section of this chapter. The remainder of this section looks at the process of getting to know one another, and the actual qualities women mentioned when asked



Inter-war brides. Top Mr and Mrs Ru, married in 1925. Below, Mr and Mrs B on their wedding day in 1934.

what made them decide that this was 'the one'.

Table VII shows the years in which couples married and the age of each partner at that time. Subjects used the term 'courting' variously to describe a stage of their pre-marital relationships which typically progressed through stages from being pals, often within a larger group, to girlfriend and boyfriend and finally formal engagement. But courtship is here defined as the period of time between meeting and marrying, and the most notable feature of most of these courtships was their length.

Table VII. Year of marriage and age of partners (in chronological order)

Her Age	His Age	Year of Marriage	Couple
26	28	1917	Taylor
22	23	1919	Paul
?	23	1922	X
19	23	1924	Walsh
25	24	1925	Ru
21	?	1925	W
21	?	1927/8	Y
21	25	1928	33
23	25	1934	32
?	?	1934	B
21	30	1935	2
24	25	1936	J
25	27	1936	Ro
20	?	1936	N
21	24	1942	G

The Taylors knew each other for more than seven years before they married; the B's courted for five. Mrs J met Mr J when she started work in the same place aged approximately fifteen and they married nine years later having become engaged when she was twenty-one. Mr Ru was literally the boy-next-door whom Mrs Ru's father suggested she invite to her twentieth birthday party. They married when she was twenty-five. Mrs Y first 'saw' her husband when she was seventeen, started going out when she was nineteen and married at twenty-one. Mrs 33 knew Mr 33 from when she was fifteen, courted him between eighteen and twenty, was engaged at twenty and married at twenty-one. It is worth adding that Mrs 33 said they had married 'early' (this was because of a problem with his mother). The W's met when she was thirteen and married when she was twenty-one and although they were never engaged because they couldn't afford a ring, Mrs W felt that there was 'an understanding' between them from the beginning.

Of course, it would be wrong to automatically equate time spent together with emotional intimacy. That there was no necessary corollary was made clear by the case of the most prolonged courtship of all. Mr 32 identified his future wife when she moved in locally aged six. They started courting seriously when he was nineteen, and married when she was twenty-three and he twenty-five. This meant their courtship extended over six years, and their acquaintance over seventeen. Nevertheless Mr 32 made the following statement about the effect of their wartime separation:

And with me going in the war you see - I was abroad for four years and eight months without a break which means I didn't see her all that time - and it brought us closer together. When I came back we was closer than when I went away - because of the time we'd lost.

However, taking all the couples' experiences into account, the overall feeling remains that future marriage partners did have plenty of

opportunity to get to know one another, if only because of the activity which their poverty forced them to engage in most commonly: walking. The common features in the following quotations are poverty, walking with occasional sitting, but surely always talking.

So you see, walks, you went for walks. You see we knew all this part of the city was all country where we used to walk. I mean, if you bought an ice cream, you know, you were sort of lucky if you both had one. (Mrs 33)

Pictures, walks and pictures, 'cause I mean them days you DID a lot of walking, didn't you. (Mrs Ro)

But to get back to the early years of the courtship when I was poor it was a walk every night. Summer and winter. I've seen the time when we've sat on a seat on the big common, Stoke Heath, and it's been snowing each side of us, and we've been sat on this seat. That was our courting. There was no front room for us them days. We never had any time to ourselves indoors. Never. (Mr 32)

We used to sit up by the top green near the Memorial park when there were railings round it and seats outside. And I was frozen 'cause I met him on the seventh of January. (Mrs N)

Neither of us were dancers at all. No, no, we would em go for walks, and whatever was involved in church life, you know. That sort of thing... And of course there was never any pocket money for the pictures or anything like that. (Mrs J)

Mrs N gave the fullest account of the reasons she chose Mr N, but many of the points she made were echoed in the answers given by other women and from these characteristics a clear composite picture emerges of the kind of partner being sought. Her first answer was that she 'loved him because he was so good and different', and when I asked what she meant by different she explained by reference to this story:

[M]y cousin got him a job ... And he said to me "That chap you're going with our 'Rene, he don't bloody drink, he don't smoke, he don't swear, what the hell does he do?" And do you know I was so proud, I thought, that's what I like about him, he's not rough like you lot, AND, first and foremost, he was clever. Couldn't live with a man who hadn't got a brain, who just talked of women and football ... I liked his intellect. Because I think it puts you apart.

She contrasted his 'intellect' with her brother-in-law's skill as an orator. He had 'kissed the Blarney Stone' and she could 'listen to him forever', but she couldn't 'live with him' because he wasn't 'clever enough' for her. The picture of restraint and difference is repeated in Jane Walsh's description of her future husband: 'but he was like David in being gentle. He was unlike the other boys in the neighbourhood because he didn't drink and he didn't swear, and he talked to a girl in a sensible and friendly way, instead of with a lot of smart-aleck chatter'.<sup>10</sup>

Kindness, gentleness, trustworthiness and respect all featured strongly.

Again, very kind, very thoughtful. Very kind, he really was; he was a lovely boy - a grand gentleman. (Mrs J)

[H]e was a nice man, he was really good he was ... He wouldn't row with me, no he'd just walk out. And he had more respect for my little finger than a good many have got for their wives today. (Mrs Ro)

I just knew he was the right one and that was it. He was trustworthy, he hadn't looked at anyone else, so.. (Mrs B)

There was evidence in other interviews that boyfriends got on well with younger brothers which may have been interpreted as indicating the makings of a good father. This was mentioned by Mrs N, Mrs Y and Mrs 33. Details about physical appearance were rarely mentioned even when asked what attracted people initially, but Mrs Ro said that Mr Ro 'was dressed

ever so nice he was' and Mrs N mentioned that Mr N 'always smelt of Palmolive soap and he had a curl, fair curls, and one curl just stood up in the air like it was ready to be hung on a Christmas tree'. Elsewhere in her interview Mrs J referred obliquely to the importance of a shared social background: 'Well we were in the same sort of, erm, environment, as it were, you know. There wasn't a lot of difference between us at all, so, we were very compatible'.

Mrs N also stated that Mr N 'didn't make a lot of demands like a lot of men would' during their courtship, and gave the following account which describes close physical proximity (to one another, as well as to baths and beds), male domesticity and, ultimately, innocence.

Like, he used to come up on a Friday night, 'cause my dear little mum couldn't work, my sister was in the kitchen, cleaning the kitchen, and the bath was in the kitchen. And doing all those sort of jobs. And I would put all the polish on, we were in a bungalow, I would put the polish all the way down the corridor where the three bedrooms were and he would follow me with the duster. And then we'd do the lounge. And then Mum would give him his supper while I went and had a bath. And, well, I don't think we were really very grown up in those days. I mean, just like a couple of kids, we just enjoyed doing things together. You know. So never any need for me to cry and wonder if I was pregnant.

It is perhaps worth noting Mr X's comment here that 'We were practically innocent in those days. I'd go with a girl and enjoy her company'. He confessed to being 'shy ... with the girls', and having a tendency to putting 'certain girls up on a pedestal'. A quality of reserve is therefore evident in most of these accounts. Mr Ro 'was a very quiet man, very reserved he was'. Mr N compensated for his emotional reserve by leaving 'little letters, and he was a good artist, so he used to do Popeye

with his pipe out of his mouth and at the bottom he'd do Popeye laughing, you see, "Arf, Arf!" Cause that's how it used to be in the kids' comics'. Although far from conclusive, the comments above taken in conjunction with the birth pattern following marriage, suggest that sexual restraint was a component of the reserve prevalent amongst these courting couples.

Lastly, given the prominence given to drinking in so many accounts of working-class life and poverty, it should be stressed that these men were uniformly uninterested in alcohol. To the comments from Mrs N and Jane Walsh quoted above may be added the following:

I was never one for going on [works] outings. Never have. They never appealed to me. It was usually a booze-up ... They went for a spree and a drink. (Mr X)

I started drinking when I was about eighteen. Half a pint of mild we used to drink ... And we'd probably have two half pints and even now that's still enough for me. I've done heavy drinking but I never wanted to. I've never, never been able to drink. (Mr 32)

Mr Taylor's father and his brothers drank the profits of the blacksmith's forge they worked together, <sup>and</sup> engaged in 'heavy drinking bouts' which made him 'a handful'. As Mr Taylor jnr's account states: 'Comment enough to say that none of the Taylor children ever let more than a thimbleful of sherry touch their lips, for the rest of their days.' Mrs 33 'loathed' drink and envied people whose parents didn't drink, although she was at a loss to account for the strength of her feelings given that her father 'never got the worse for beer'; the pub at the end of the road was a daily stopping off point for both parents. Unsurprisingly she chose a husband who showed no inclination to drink. Mrs Ru asserted that 'there wasn't the money' to drink, and Mrs W that Mr W might go in a pub as a special treat on holiday.

That drink was a needful, though not always enjoyed, part of



exclusively male camaraderie outside work is evident from Mrs N's account of Mr N's levels of alcohol consumption before they met. He 'wasn't a drinker, you know. When I met him he was an eight pint a night man, but not because he loved drink, but because all his friends went in for a drink and he would have been alone'. The company of girlfriends seems to have provided a welcome means of escaping this ritual, and providing a different sort of conviviality. Mr Ro, the only man who regularly visited the pub, seems from his wife's account to have been supplanted in her affections by their first child, a suggestion she did not altogether deny. But his drinking was tolerated because of its moderation: 'He didn't go out and abuse himself or anything like that. No he had a quiet drink and that was it'. Their first row, which happened after they had been going out for three weeks, had been over him wanting her to go for a drink with him, something she steadfastly declined to do. These men stand in marked contrast to the image of masculine sacrifice portrayed by Young and Wilmott when writing about the transition to life in Greenleigh.<sup>12</sup> Giving this type of expenditure up didn't constitute an issue within this group.

These partnerships were not entered into lightly then. By the time a wedding took place, relationships were already of long duration. Mrs Ro's experience in particular contradicts any suggestion that women were trapped into marriages through passivity rather than passion. She 'gave him a run for his money' during their courtship and 'went out with other lads', including one who lasted six weeks before she decided that 'no, no, wasn't the same'. Mrs Ru enjoyed a holiday flirtation which necessitated the removal of her engagement ring. Mr J and Mr G had to be models of patient persistence while pursuing their respective mates, both resorting to methods of literal entrapment. Mr J operated a lift mechanism to trap Mrs J in the lift at work with only her head and shoulders visible above floor level, and she reported to her parents that 'that J- boy's always

wanting to, em, be in the general office when I'm ready to go home'. Mr G took advantage of his position whilst a policeman on traffic duty to block the progress of the car Mrs G was chauffering<sup>u</sup> until she agreed to a date. It worked: eventually she began taking that route on purpose.

In two accounts, one male and one female, there are interesting admissions about childhood behaviour which seem to cast light on the process of selection of suitable spouses. Mrs 33's education was interrupted several times and this is how she described what happened on her return to school.

I could read ... but I couldn't do anything else. All the other kids could do all sorts, I could read. And when I went to this school. There were some girls much cleverer than me, ... I didn't want to play with those that couldn't do things, I worked like a galley slave to get up with these girls, so I know what I wanted, I didn't want these that didn't know anything, they were no good to me.

Mr X felt that he'd 'got no home life that's really worthy of the name' and in a similar way to Mrs 33 identified in this case 'the better types of boys' whose homes with their pianos and indoor games he was then able to penetrate. Mr X utilised a different skill to achieve similar aims: 'That's how I got on so well at school. I lived among the rough element, the scruffs, but I was the best footballer among them'.

By whatever means, and in defiance of the uninspiring economic circumstances of the day, the majority of these women succeeded in identifying men who we might say had 'something about them'. The kind of something that made them the 'blue-eyed boy' of future employers, as Mr 32 was, or the recipients of 'golden [career] opportunities' as Mr Ru and Mr J were. The kind of something that gave them additional remunerative skills, such as Mr N and Mr X's radio repair skills; Mr Taylor's musical ability; Mr

32's painting and decorating sideline. Measuring the happiness of these marriages in actuality lies way beyond the scope of this discussion, but in economic terms, these women chose well.<sup>13</sup>

### *Family sizes*

Much of the debate about declining family size during the inter-war period focuses on awareness of and attitudes towards different forms of contraception. Within my interviews I aimed only to try <sup>to</sup> establish whether or not families had been explicitly planned, but was alert to any information on access to contraceptive devices. My findings are detailed below and in tables VIII and IX. The numbers of children born to these couples strongly suggest, in and of themselves, that family size was being limited and births spaced, especially when compared to the size of parents' families of origin. However, except for one case, I am unable to say whether this was merely the result of a great deal of abstinence. Successful contraceptive practice of whatever kind may be taken to suggest a degree of co-operation between husband and wife that supports a general thesis of greater closeness; but, if only because use of contraception (other than withdrawal or abstinence) has a cost implication, it would have been useful to have found out more.

In an otherwise interesting chapter in the collection edited by Lancaster and Mason, Marjorie Lodge discusses the development of voluntary child welfare clinics in Coventry (1900-40) without a single reference to the availability, or otherwise, of contraceptive advice.<sup>14</sup> This is especially disappointing as she mentions Margery Spring-Rice who did so much to draw attention to the misery caused by repeated pregnancies.<sup>15</sup> However, the invisibility of the issue in her account is in keeping with Mrs L's statement that the subject was strictly off limits within the bounds of conversations held among mothers attending meetings: she was a

member of the Women's Co-operative Guild in the city and it played a role in bringing about the setting up of the voluntary clinics.

Table VII. Years of marriage and births of children, by family, in date order of marriages

Year of Marriage	First Child	Second Child	Third Child	Fourth Child	Fifth Child	Sixth Child	Seventh Child	Name
1917	1923							Taylor
1919	1921	1923	1930					Paul
1922	1922	1923	1924					X
1924	1934	1938						Walsh
1925	1930	1936						Ru
1925	1926	1932						W
1927/8	1930	1940						Y
1928	1929	1932	1934/5					33
1934	(1937)	1939						32
1934	1937							B
1936	1936							J
1936	1936	1939	1941	1944	1946	1948	1951	Ro
1936	1941	1943	(1946)	1947				N

NB. The bracketed dates indicate babies that died at, or close to, the time of birth.

Two sources of contraceptive supplies did thankfully come to light. A local historian who grew up in pre-war Coventry, told me that her hairdresser was the local supplier in her part of the city. Most hairdressers of the period were men, it should be noted, although it was at this time that increasing numbers of women began to make inroads into the profession as evidenced by Coventry's apprenticeship records. My other information comes from Brian Taylor's account, which goes as follows:

Mrs Fall's mother was a midwife and a strong supporter of the small family syndrome ... Later I realised that Midwife Campion was the supplier of some ugly grey balloons, stored in boxes of chalk dust. Rosemary and I uncovered one in a bedroom drawer and spent ages trying to blow it up.<sup>16</sup>

Taylor's parents were married in 1917 and he recorded that 'Amongst our neighbours and friends [in Coventry] at least three-quarters were single child families'. He gave as reasons for his parents' decision greater financial flexibility, their mothers' experience of having ten children apiece, but also a political gesture in response to the losses incurred in the Great War: 'A hundred thousand men killed in a day, at the whim of the High Command, was not so easy to forget. So why be a partner in providing the victims?'.<sup>17</sup> In this last respect, their view found a sympathetic echo from Jane Walsh's husband, whose equally anti-establishment view was remembered as follows:

"What," he asked, "is there to bring children into the world for? God knows we've worked and we've tried, and what have we had? Just one long struggle to exist. This government has never given us a square deal. They will have no kids of mine, working and starving for them."<sup>18</sup>

Mass Observation's 1945 publication Britain and Her Birth-Rate reported that both of these views were widely held in connection with

attitudes to desirable family size, although in a time of war after a decade of economic uncertainty it would have been surprising if they had not been.<sup>19</sup> In addition, they noted that a number of references were made to the fact that the Queen had only two children, which the investigating team described as a 'striking example' of a perceived socio-economic sanction for smaller families.<sup>20</sup>

Jane Walsh makes it quite clear in her autobiography that babies were something to be decided on. She married at nineteen but by twenty-seven her 'dream children were still dream children' because 'Charlie would not even discuss the possibility'. In addition to the spectre of producing the next generation of workers was the stigma attached to having 'dole babies' for the added benefits they brought with them. Nevertheless Jane Walsh persisted and two Walsh daughters arrived in 1934 and 1938.

Mrs 33 was one of four children; her husband one of two. She was the only wife who wanted a bigger family than she herself had been part of: 'I wanted six children. I needn't have had any children, but I wanted six children. But of course, came the war, and I never had any more'. When asked to clarify what she meant by not needing to have any children, she replied that 'we wanted to have those children by choice', meaning that she and her husband were practising some form of family limitation. Their daughter was born thirteen months after they married, and she was two and a half when their first son was born and five when the second arrived.

Mr and Mrs Ru married in 1925 but their first child was not born until 1930 and their second came in 1936. Whilst admitting that the arrival of the second child was 'a bit of a shock' after so long a gap during which they had parted with all their baby things, Mrs Ru resisted any suggestion that their small, widely spaced family was the result of a resort to contraception: 'There was never any chance of having more. No it just happened that way. There was no birth control those days and it just

happened. I was married five years before D- came to town'. Mrs Ru was herself one of four children and she stated that she and Mr Ru were 'quite happy just having the two'. The suspicion remains that if Mr Ru had been using a condom, for instance, Mrs Ru may have been oblivious: before Mr Ru collapsed in the bath in his eighties, Mrs Ru had never seen him naked.

Mr and Mrs W by contrast had reached agreement over their family ideal, and presumably the means by which to achieve it, early on: 'We made up our minds when we got married. We wanted a girl and a boy. I don't know what would have happened if I'd had two boys or two girls. We might have tried again'. The Ws married in 1925 and their children were born in 1926 and 1932.

There were three other single child families in this group besides the Taylors. Both the B's and the J's firstborns had fairly severe asthma-based health problems at a time when treatment was more difficult than it is now: this at least partly explained their failure to have more. Mr and Mrs 32's planned family of three was reduced to one by the loss of their first child and then the interruption of the war, after which Mrs 32 declined to start childbearing again.

There were five families with two children, three of which are mentioned above; three families with three children, one of which was meant to be six as described above; and one family with none, the Gs who lost their firstborn. The only mother to have four children had the last explicitly at the instruction of her doctor after losing her third: he told her 'it won't alter your heart, but it will fill your arms'.

Mrs N told a story about an Irish family of her acquaintance who had 'about half a dozen [children] - you know the Irish - no birth control', which suggests that she utilised some means of birth control herself, but could equally be the result of latter-day prejudices. The biggest family of all belonged to the Ros who had seven children, with Mrs Ro seeming to

be in helpless ignorance of any means of preventing their arrival. Mr Ro, it may be added, was one of ten or eleven children in a Welsh family, and himself an atheist. The frequency of family sizes is shown below.

Table IX Frequency of family size in subject group

Children	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Families	1	4	5	(3)4	(1)	0	0	1

NB. The bracketed figures refer to the family whose fourth child explicitly replaced the third which died in infancy.

***Earnings***

The most notable characteristic of the employment patterns of most of the male subjects in this study is their complexity. Only one man (Mr 33) remained with the same company (Morris Motors) throughout this period and, indeed, throughout his married life. Working careers are here described from school leaving age to 1939 - where information is full enough - to demonstrate the ongoing search for a better opening, and because ten or a dozen years had typically elapsed between leaving school and marriage during which time the pursuit of a job good enough to marry on was a consistent feature. This is evident from Mrs N's statement that 'my cousin got him a job, 'cause the money wasn't very good at the Daimler, you know, and we wanted to be married'; and Mr 32's that:

The final coat of paint, that's what I was doing in the finish.

That's the job where you couldn't afford to make any mistakes...

and that's the job I got married on. I felt that when I'd got

that job I were pretty safe. Ah I got married on that - final

spray.



For the older members of the group, working lives were interrupted anyway by the exigencies of the 1914-18 war, necessitating military service for many including Mr Paul and Mr X. Mr Taylor's application to join the Royal Engineers was blocked several times because of his status as a skilled worker at the Royal Ordnance works in Coventry. This was his second job after arriving in Coventry in 1910, a move forced by the failure of Crossley Bros. engineering company, Manchester, to retain his services after the completion of his apprenticeship as a skilled machine operative. The first job was at the Auto-Machinery Co. which produced machine tools (to 1913). At the close of the war he moved again to join the Tool Room of Armstrong Siddeley which produced 'everything from aero-engines to motor cars'.<sup>21</sup> Mr Paul was invalided out of the Royal Field Artillery in 1917 after a bout of trench fever and moved into munitions work in Coventry. Mr X was offered 'a nice little [army] office job' at the end of the war but opted for early demobilisation as a skilled engineering worker. He told them, 'I'm not interested in staying in the army in any category ... I started learning a trade at home and I want to get back to it'.

In Coventry, the primacy accorded the skilled worker (usually a time-served engineer), exerted a strong hold over the male workforce. It may be significant that the two men who dwelt most on this facet of their identity (Mr X and Mr 32), were denied the opportunity of an apprenticeship, and it is therefore probable that their admission to this select group was hard won. Mr 32 was the quintessential example of someone who gauged his worth according to his earnings. His work story is of pennies scored off colleagues, of the rise from four ha'pence (4½d) an hour to five ha'pence (5½d) an hour and on up to eight pence and nine pence an hour when he really 'started to live'. When trade was good, a skilled man who felt he wasn't getting recognition or fair treatment could

up and leave with total confidence of finding another opening: hence the movements from Standard to Alvis to Morris (Mr Paul), from Singer to Daimler to personal mechanic/chauffeur and back to Daimler (Mr Ru), from Daimler to Smith Street to Armstrong Whitworth (Mr N). Ironically, however, this same identity could also work against increased earning potential. The move upwards to chargehand, foreman or ratefixer carried a stigma with it. 'They'd what we called "go over to the other side" ... You always looked at it that they'd sold the pass', said Mr X, who further asserted that it was the men of modest talents who were promoted, men with genuine ability being too valuable where they were. In addition a move sideways into track or repetition work which offered 'big money' was at best a betrayal of one's standards, at worst a threat to one's mental health. Mrs 33 put it like this:

If [Mr 33] had gone and worked, say, in the other part, not the toolroom, where they were turning things out he'd have got twice as much money, but I think he would have had to have worked twice as hard, probably, and they're not used to it, you see. They're used to the high work, long time, doing it properly, and I don't think he could ever have done that, it would have driven him mad, probably.

Besides skill and lack of continuity, the other significant feature of these men's *modus operandi* was contacts. These are stories that revolve around interceptions at factory gates, meetings in pubs, people known through cricket as well as family and friends. Sport could be seen to be working just as effectively to generate a social network in this arena as it had done for Mr X in the playground.

Mr X's career illustrates very well the impact external economic forces and trade fluctuations could have on an ordinary working career. The outbreak of the First World War caused a reorganization at Daimler

which saw him move from office boy into the works. On his return from war he made an advantageous move to Riley only to be scuppered by the effects of the foundry moulders' strike, that is 'last in, first out'. After two years in building work he returned to Daimler in time to benefit from the 1922 re-opening of the annual Olympia Motor Show and after several years in the seasonally affected floating workforce, finally 'got his feet in with the regulars'. In 1929 a big contract from Bristol brought big rewards:

I got this job on the cylinders, I couldn't go wrong. I could do as much overtime as I liked ... They wanted these cylinders badly ... Well I cut that thread for two years. I got regular overtime, and moving over here like, I moved into a new house and I'd come out of a little cottage, one-up and one-down. I'd got to furnish the place really, you know. It was a good start this contract.

Then between 1930 and 1935 or '36 Daimler 'went into low water ... The banks put an efficiency team in, we had a real short back and sides'. In 1938 an old mate offered Mr X work at Armstrong Siddeley if he would 'mate' him on the night shift; this again had an immediate impact. 'When I went there ... I was getting quite fifty per cent more money than I was getting at the Daimler ... The first couple of months I'd been there, the amount extra I earned, I sent the two daughters ... away on holiday'.

For Mr Paul, whose family was slightly longer established, 'regular work at piece-work rates for a skilled craftsman', this time at Morris, 'meant that money was being paid into his account with the Ideal Benefit Society'.<sup>22</sup> The seasonality of much of the work in the motor trade was a much discussed problem, although becoming less severe in the later 1930s as volume production took off. Mr W moved from the Hillman Humber company after three months in Coventry to British Thomson Houston which

specialised in electrical goods because although the rewards weren't as great, the work was more regular. According to Mrs W 'he never had a big wage. It was regular and that was it, that was all you could say'. He had earned three pounds a week when employed prop carrying in the shipyards on Tyneside, and now gave Mrs W £2 10s housekeeping a week. She was not privy to the precise contents of his pay packet, but there was no evidence to suggest that he kept much back for himself. Mr 32's solution to seasonality was to make himself so invaluable to his employers that he was sometimes 'the only bloke for two months on end' in his section.

The other features of the working year that presented difficulties were unpaid holidays which were usually described as a huge threat to financial equilibrium. The Holidays With Pay Act of 1938 consolidated gains made by some industrial workers in the immediate post-war period and meant that in 1939 eleven million employees received a week's paid holiday. The city definitely had a recognised holiday week as is attested to by an item in The Times of 27 January 1939 which reported that, 'The annual industrial holiday week at Coventry is to be changed from August Bank Holiday to the week after June 24, and the Whitsun two days' holiday postponed to September 25 and 26, by the decision of a representative conference of the interests concerned'.

Neither Mr W nor Mr Ru enjoyed any entitlement to paid holiday until this later period, although the Ws benefited from their local authority tenancy which provided a week's free rent at Christmas, again at Easter, and a fortnight in the summer. Mrs Ru recalled what was certainly a more common experience. 'If you didn't go to work, you didn't get any money ... Easter and Christmastime - it took us about three weeks for us before we recovered, got a full week's pay.' A recent debate in the Coventry Citizen about the origins of the term 'Bull week', revealed that it was common practice among work gangs on piece-work in the city's factories to hold

back some claims for payment on completed work until the week before they went on holiday to ensure a good wage packet.<sup>23</sup> In these and other ways it proved possible for a high proportion of subjects to get away for some kind of holiday.<sup>24</sup> In a city full of migrants, it was frequently the case that holidays took the form of a return visit to families and the workplace could provide useful leads which would reduce costs. Mr W was able to minimise journey costs by monitoring the routes taken by lorry drivers making deliveries for his employers (BTH), and arranging lifts. Mrs W recalls:

We used to go on long distance lorries. You know at the front ..., well, they have a big place there where they can sleep.

[Mr W] used to get to know who was going. And they used to take me for a few, a couple of pounds ... But mind it was dirty, when you got out you were filthy! It was the only way we could get up. 'Cause it was cheap you see - for two pounds we could all get up, where it would have cost me, what, six or seven pounds wouldn't it?

Despite the omnipresence of money in accounts - the earning of it, the saving of it, the not having enough of it - actual figures for take home pay are rare. This has as much to do with the complexity of pay structures and the constant inter-company manoeuvring as any reticence based on male pride or female ignorance. The importance of piecework has already been highlighted above. The significance of personal negotiation, overtime and enhanced rates for night work are described below by Mrs 33:

In my husband's case you wouldn't get the same money as the man on the next machine, you got merit money. When we were first married .... he went at least four times to the Foreman to get a penny an hour merit money, and each time the boss wouldn't see him, he hadn't got time. And it used to be a big thing to go, and in the end he got

it. It was called merit money but it was all kept under the hat.

And:

There were periods when he used to get all the overtime cut because really and truly, we bought a little Morgan [car] and it was all bought on overtime money, that he used to go to work straight through till seven o'clock, instead of coming home at half past five. And they'd work till two on a Saturday, and he did that for a number of years, and of course, night money was also ten shillings more than day money, so you see, that gave us all a bit of extra money.

Mrs 33 never knew exactly what her husband earned but felt this was a mistake 'because I often thought he was much richer than what he was'. Mrs Ru declared that there was 'no secret there' and Mr Ru earned 'about three or four pound a week': like Mrs W she also received £2 10s housekeeping. Charlie Walsh had never earned more than £2 14s on the rare occasions when he could get work in the textile mills in Oldham, and for him and Jane 'the miracle had happened' when he started work in Coventry in a steel works. His wife's long-suffering was symbolically rewarded as she described:

He loved his work. He worked from 8 am to 8 pm every day and was delighted if he was given week-end work. He would bring his pay envelope home and give it to me unopened ... It was always between £4 10s and £5 - a fortune, or so it seemed in the summer of 1939.<sup>25</sup>

Two of the men were engaged in white collar occupations at this date, and their incomes are worth comparing with those of their industrially employed contemporaries. Mrs J, wife of the trainee accountant, stated that 'when my husband and I married he was only getting three pounds a week. Mr B, the insurance salesman, reported that, 'in those early days I was getting three pounds a week and that wasn't very much to live on ...

that was the weekly income, but I also got commission so that it was more than that in actual fact, 'bout five I'd say'.

Whatever satisfaction Mr Paul had derived from his own career working 'within a thou. of an inch', by 1936 he was hoping for more for his son who relates that:

Father had kindled my interest when suggesting that I might like to be a journalist or a professional golfer... I did not seriously think about his reason for putting up the second idea, other than to gather that it was worth consideration being pursued in the open air with green grass and trees around, and that had to be better than factory work.<sup>26</sup>

### *Politics*

Political affiliations or sympathies were not a focus of questions within the interviews carried out by myself with respondents. Some material on this subject nevertheless emerged from other sources used within the research. This section provides a sample of this material to reinforce the point that this group of people espoused politically diverse views and cannot be regarded in any sense as a homogenous political 'bloc'. In many cases, contrasting views were held by different generations of the same family, and later different views or different intensities of political feeling were reported between husbands and wives.

Mr 32 described his father, a cobbler, as being 'keen where politics was concerned'. He was unusual in that he was actually politically active and did election work on behalf of the Liberals. Mr 32 reported that a big picture of Gladstone hung in their house all the years he was at home. Mr 32 characterised his father's views as follows:

Oh he was a real, absolute, diehard, Lloyd George Liberal. And anybody that had got any socialist tendencies at all .... was a Bolshie. Anybody that wasn't a Conservative or a Liberal in my dad's book was a Bolshie .... And yet he was so poor, you know, but he was a real out and out Lloyd George Liberal.

Mr 32 senior 'nearly went mad' when his son announced that he was going to join a trade union, and yet, although this son described himself as having 'socialist tendencies', the main attraction was an extra four shillings per week during the motor trade's summer lay-off and the choice of signing on at the Vehicle Builder's club rather than suffering the ignominy of the Labour Exchange: he was not interested in any sense of solidarity or the scope for collective action. He considered himself a skilled craftsman and held the view that 'it was the peasants that came out on strike, the lowest of the low'.

Mrs 33's father was proud to belong to the Foreman's Mutual Benefit during his early working life, but had to join the AEU in the Thirties when ill health prevented him from maintaining his foreman's role and he rejoined the ordinary workforce. She described him as being 'more ... Liberal or Conservative than ever he was Labour, because that's how, in a boss's job, you're not quite with the men'. Despite union membership he was 'never very keen really' and she thought this was because 'he'd seen the boss's side, and knew how far they could go, probably; he perhaps thought the workmen didn't realise that the boss couldn't do what they expected. See, he knew both sides'.

The mothers of both Mr 32 and Mrs 33 were reported to be politically passive, simply following the choice made by their husbands. Mrs 33 said that her father 'always voted, but what he voted of course I don't always know, but he'd vote, and my mother would vote the same, so whatever he voted she'd vote'. Mr 32 said that his mother would 'vote Liberal .... She'd



vote Liberal because me Dad did. That would be the only political view of hers'.

Mrs 33 however, was turned 'from a girl into a Socialist' at twelve by her father's experience of unemployment in the immediate aftermath of World War One: 'Him and I didn't have the same views, for all what he'd gone through, but he hadn't gone through what I'd gone through for him'. Aged about fourteen or fifteen Mrs 33 was taken by a workmate who was 'that way inclined' to hear political speakers including Manny Shinwell at a local school. Her father 'used to have a fit .... [H]e thought perhaps I was going Red, you see, he was more moderate'. Mrs 33's husband too, was more ambivalent in his political allegiance.

Mrs Y's father was very keen on Lloyd George and the Liberals, reckoning National Insurance to be 'one of the best things done for working men'. Her mother tended towards Liberalism too as she thought that the 'Conservatives was only for the rich people'.

Bud Paul reported that his own father was a paid up member of the Labour Party (29) but that posters of both a red and a blue hue were abundant in their neighbourhood during elections (ibid). However by the later Thirties, whilst still voting Labour, his father had nevertheless left the Labour Party and could be heard roundly condemning the 'so-called British working man'.<sup>27</sup> This was a household in which the Daily Herald arrived every morning and Reynolds News with its supplement of the Co-operative Citizen arrived every Sunday, but the subscription to Everybody's Weekly was dropped in favour of the Radio Times.<sup>28</sup>

### *Footnotes to Chapter Three*

1. See for example: M. Anderson (ed), Sociology of the Family (Harmondsworth, 1971); M. Anderson, 'What is new about the modern family: An historical perspective' (British Society for Population Studies; Conference: The Family; University of Bath, 14-16 Feb 1983), OU Papers No. 31; M. Drake (ed), Time, Family and Community (Oxford, 1994).
2. Interviews were tape-recorded and followed a loosely structured questionnaire.
3. All quotations from interviews unless otherwise stated.
4. Stockford's account is cited by P. Lynam in 'Domestic life in Coventry 1920-1939' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, pp.259-60. Unfortunately this chapter is not footnoted, so no further information is available. Stockford's address would have been of particular interest in this context.
5. Mr Sutton left Birmingham to found the bakery in 1912. This information appeared in a 'Traders Supplement' to the Coventry Standard of 6 Sept 1963.
6. J. Walsh, Not Like That (1953), p.7.
7. B. Taylor, Seide Maisies (1994), p.4.
8. Taylor, Seide Maisies, p. 21.
9. See PRO Ed/21 41896 for information on Centaur Road School.
10. Walsh, Not Like That, p.34.
11. Taylor, Seide Maisies, p.21.
12. M. Young and P. Wilmott, Family and Kinship in East London (Harmondsworth, 1962), p. 145.
13. Research on the emotional content of marriages is currently being carried out by N. Higgins, 'Changing perceptions of marriage in the English working class, 1920-1960' (PhD in process, Downing College, Cambridge).
14. M. Lodge, 'Aspects of infant welfare in Coventry, 1900-40' in Lancaster

and Mason (eds), Life and Labour pp.81-97.

15. M. Llewelyn Davies (ed), Maternity: Letters From Working Women 1915 (1978).
16. Taylor, Seide Maisies, p.33.
17. Taylor, Seide Maisies, p.25.
18. Walsh, Not Like That, p.66.
19. Mass Observation, Britain and Her Birth-Rate (1945), pp.32-33.
20. Mass Observation, Britain and Her Birth-Rate, p.125.
21. Taylor, Seide Maisies, p.18.
22. Paul, Sent From Coventry, p.50.
23. See Coventry Citizen, 24 August 1995.
24. The symbolic significance of holiday entitlement is discussed extensively in G. Cross, Time and Money: The Making of Consumer Culture (1993).
25. Walsh, Not Like This, p.90 and p.92.
26. Paul, Sent From Coventry, p.61.
27. Paul, Sent From Coventry, p.48.
28. Paul, Sent From Coventry, p.46, p.48.

**CHAPTER FOUR**

***The socialisation of shoppers***

In this chapter the term socialisation is used to denote the 'process whereby people learn the rules and practices of their group, and the expected and accepted forms of behaving are transmitted', as defined by F.M.L. Thompson in an article published in 1981.<sup>o</sup> The part played by home, school, church, neighbourhood, workplace, sales environment and leisure as shapers of shopping behaviour is considered. The material does not allow firm conclusions to be drawn as to their differential impact, rather the context is described in which a complex interaction took place. This theme is further developed in Chapter Six. In addition, this chapter begins to address the question of whether the shopper was really always a woman.

### *Home*

If we accept that the family is the primary and most powerful agency of socialisation, then the story of the socialisation of working-class shoppers must begin in childhood homes, with the roles and responsibilities learned there.

The extent to which a child of either sex was taught domestic skills in a self-conscious way within the home was determined by a number of factors including the number and sex-distribution of children, the degree of freedom from dire poverty, the predisposition of the parents and possibly local custom. Dire poverty increased the likelihood of children being involved to an intense degree with all aspects of house work, but decreased the likelihood of anything being methodically taught. The primary purpose here was less to learn skills than to help mother in what was likely to be a very stressful day to day existence. Anything learned in this way or by observation alone was likely to be imperfectly understood. In homes with fewer financial worries, a sentimental attitude towards childhood may have been adopted so that the allocation of particular tasks to children, such as cleaning cutlery, functioned more as

a symbol of parental authority than as part of a concerted effort to instill domestic skills. Probably a minority of children were actually taught in a methodical way. However all working-class children helped out in the home.

Leonora Eyles, who ten years later had taken on the role of educator of housewives in the magazine Woman's Own, noted in her 1922 publication The Woman In The Little House the tension between things taught at school and the home environment. She observed that:

To teach the children practical buying and cooking will not be a very simple matter either. They may learn quite well at school, but they will meet with a blank wall of opposition at home ... the child has only to say tentatively, "Mum, teacher says so and so," and Mum's lips set, her face hardens.<sup>1</sup>

Disciplines of all sorts taught in school (particularly to do with money management) could be *reinforced* by behaviour at home, but where they were in direct conflict with normal domestic rites and routines, it was likely to be the school learning that was jettisoned.

In homes with daughters it was frequently the case that they were implicitly or explicitly prepared for the sex-segregated demands of later life by being made to carry out domestic tasks for brothers who remained free to play. Not uncommonly this caused bitterness and resentment. But sexual differentiation of this kind was not the only model for training youngsters, and probably not even the commonest one.

A Bethnal Green woman who grew up in the 1860s recorded that 'so many people did their washing on the same day, and everybody had large families and generally kept the elder girls, and sometimes boys, at home to mind the little ones'.<sup>2</sup> Richard Hoggart records that as a teenager during the early 1930s it was he who queued self-consciously on Friday evenings for the family groceries.<sup>3</sup> More recent scholarship has tended to confirm

a more diverse picture of children's experience in and around the home during the years the Coventry shoppers of the 1930s would have been growing up. In Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918, Ellen Ross describes how boys as well as girls lived in the world of their mothers during this period and were intimately involved with child care, cooking, cleaning, laundering, shopping, and even nursing the sick. She found that the 'autobiographical and oral history literature is studded with the memories of today's old men of the intricacies of diapering a baby, getting a wash white, or making a tasty stew for under sixpence'.<sup>4</sup> Joanna Bourke's work on Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960 similarly found that at least some mothers were proud of training their boys to do a wide range of domestic tasks. She documents the son of a postman in the 1910s who:

Lived in a home where scrubbing and dusting were a daily routine in which my brother and I used to play our parts.

We never questioned these duties, any more than we questioned the round of mealtimes, or the ritual of going to bed.

She also cites the former millworker who wrote in the 1930s of his own mother who taught him housework on the grounds that it would come in useful in later life when a man must or should help his wife in some of the harder household tasks.<sup>5</sup>

It was often an economic necessity for mothers to bind sons as well as daughters to them, to ensure the addition of later wages to the family budget. In most parts of the country a son's income would far exceed anything a daughter could earn. Children's consciousness of their mother's sacrifice was encouraged and a debt of gratitude built up. Even in those homes where mothers strove to hide their fears about managing, children quickly learnt through observation; and in homes where mothers talked openly about money worries children seamlessly took on the role of helpers

and dreamed of the day when they could hand over their first pay.

As a common strategy for overcoming poor storage facilities and making money stretch was to buy small quantities of foodstuffs with great frequency, running an errand to the shops was possibly the task undertaken with greatest regularity by children. This made for minimal disruption to other domestic chores and child-care responsibilities. In a situation where credit needed to be applied for, the pathos of a child's request might be relied upon to ensure a positive response. Hoggart again, 'I had a regular sick envy of those who paid off cheerfully, a horrid shyness of going through the weekly form of words, "Grandma says she'll leave five shillings till next week"'.<sup>6</sup>

As a task that involved the handling of money and the responsibility for acquiring precious resources, as well as taking the child beyond the confines of the home and into a public arena, going to the shops was probably more emotionally charged than other household duties for boys as well as girls. When Mrs Ru, who moved to Coventry after marriage in the late 1920s describes how:

I used to do shopping for mother ... and I tell you, used to walk ... and go and get bread, and I used to go Saturday nights and get meat cheap, used to walk to Southend, and I used to get a 'target' which consisted of a whole shoulder of lamb and a breast of lamb, for a shilling

she is describing the pride she felt at being trusted with this task, the satisfaction she felt at carrying it out successfully, and the means by which a life-long habit of shrewd shopping practices were set in train.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to those writers who have described how working-class wives would defend their husband's reputation even when he was brutal, how a man's dignity had to be kept and any failings on his part remain private, Ellen Ross found that humour was one of the channels through which



domestic tensions might be mediated and that wives shared jokes with children and neighbours about husbands' failings.<sup>8</sup> Denigrating men's ability as shoppers was part of this, as well as serving to underline the integrity of women's sphere of authority within the home.<sup>9</sup> Fathers upheld the notion that money management was women's special task and special talent, whilst mothers strove to keep 'their end of the bargain' and to maintain their self-respect as 'good wives' and 'good managers'. Both may have articulated the idea that tasks suitable for boys to perform were not to be expected from grown men.

Boys entering the world of paid employment could not be sure that as masculine role models their fathers would retain any credibility or earn any respect once they could be observed at close hand in the work place, but the evidence of their mother's daily triumphs over adversity exerted a strong and continuing hold over their loyalties. It makes little sense to suggest that insights into the drudgery of domestic labour or the mysteries of money management gained during childhood evaporated as boys grew into men and transferred their regard to wives.

### *School*

Very little has been written about boy's domestic education at school during this period because it has generally been assumed not to exist. Joanna Bourke has thankfully set this matter to rights and her findings are considered with some observations on the situation in Coventry below. By contrast a great deal has been written about the evolution of girl's education with particular reference to the introduction of domestic science lessons. For the purposes of this study it is hopelessly flawed however, because it focuses on childcare, hygiene, needlework and cookery. Training designed to enhance the future housewife's ability in what was arguably her most important task, that of money management, has remained invisible

to date because it does not feature under the heading of domestic science at all, but under the heading of arithmetic. Carol Dyhouse, for instance, suggests that an emphasis on the 'three Rs' and proficiency in arithmetic, in particular, were not deemed to be appropriate or necessary.<sup>10</sup>

In the years around the turn of the century middle-class concerns aroused by the poor quality of recruits for the Boer War, combined with a declining birth rate and an infant mortality rate that remained stubbornly high coalesced to generate a kind of hysteria over the fate of the nation, helped along by eugenic and social-Darwinistic thinking. The trend in Victorian thinking that viewed the poor as personally responsible for their situation retained a strong hold; and if it was the unsatisfactory lifestyles of the poor that constituted the problem, then education promised to be the means by which they could be reformed and this class of people enabled to do their duty by the Empire. The self-interest of would-be educationalists who were finding it increasingly difficult to recruit and retain domestic staff also played a part in determining the shape of young working-class women's school curriculum.

The Board of Education were able to influence curriculum development in the elementary schools through its provision of grants. Grants were first made available for the teaching of cookery on 1882, and for laundry work in 1890. An 1896 report on the progress of domestic economy teaching stated that cookery grants were being paid in respect of 134,930 girls at 2,729 schools, and 11,720 girls were attending laundry classes at 400 schools by this date.<sup>11</sup> In the most progressive of the cookery centres operated by the London School Board rooms were fitted out as model artisan homes wherein 'By careful arrangement of colours the children are taught that usefulness and art may be combined, and comfortable substitutes for cheap stuffed furniture are placed before their eyes'.<sup>12</sup> Some attempts were therefore being made to mould the

criteria which future consumers might apply to their household purchases.

Coventry was extremely unlikely to be among this vanguard. Education was one of the areas in which the Council prided itself on its frugality and economic management. In 1933 the Chairman of the Education Committee described in a local newspaper how 'In fifty years of technical education in the City the only capital expenditure on [it] has been £6,000'.<sup>13</sup> In those fifty years the city's population had almost quadrupled. Severe overcrowding in inadequate, if not condemned accommodation was the norm at primary level, and it was more difficult for a working-class boy to get a secondary education in Coventry than almost anywhere else in the country. Figures on comparative expenditure by county boroughs for the years 1918-1939 almost all show the city well behind the majority, particularly in relation to libraries, houses, schools and poor relief.<sup>14</sup> Under these circumstances, which produced the image of children being taught as they shuffled in front of an open fire, it is difficult to imagine the investment being made into the equipment and facilities required to teach domestic economy effectively.<sup>15</sup>

One of His Majesty's Inspectors of Schools visited Eastern Green Church of England school in Coventry on 22 April 1914 and set the first class the following sums:

- i. A girl bought a hat for  $\frac{4}{9}$  and two pairs of stockings. She has  $\frac{2}{3}$  change from 10/-. How much did the stockings cost per pair?
- ii. 

2 $\frac{1}{4}$ lbs cheese	$\frac{1}{6}$
1 $\frac{1}{4}$ lbs bacon	$\frac{1}{4}$
9 eggs	$6 \frac{3}{4}$ d
3 loaves	$8 \frac{1}{4}$ d
$3 \frac{3}{4}$ lbs butter	$4 \frac{1}{2}$

---

8/6½

Find the price per lb., and of each loaf and egg.<sup>16</sup>

Practical exercises in arithmetic were commonly phrased in terms of shopping requirements if only to aid children's attainment of proficiency with Britain's complicated system of pounds, shillings and pence. This may well be the full extent to which local schools dealt with this area of domestic responsibility. It is worth adding though, that as Adrian Forty has pointed out:

The people likely to have been most affected by the propoganda about health and welfare and to have been made the most sensitive to the need for efficiency and hygiene, were those at school during the first two decades of the century, the adults of the inter-war years.<sup>17</sup>

A generation of future housewives were being created who would be particularly prone to the blandishments used to sell an ever-expanding range of household cleaning products in the years under consideration. It will be remembered that in Chapter Three Mrs Y was recorded as saying that the qualities stressed most during her time at school were 'obedience and cleanliness'.

Joanna Bourke has usefully highlighted the state's intervention in the domestic education of boys: 'Manual training was explicitly introduced to dovetail with girl's domestic education: both were intended to teach gendered roles within the household ... Male domesticity was promoted by the state'.<sup>18</sup> A Code of 1909 introduced manual education into most elementary schools in the country; half of elementary schools also introduced gardening. The purpose of such classes was emphatically *not* intended to prepare boys for later manual trades, but to enable the grown man 'to make his home ... comfortable'.<sup>19</sup> Provision was obviously patchy as only half a million elementary school boys were receiving tuition of this kind by the 1920s, but where it was available its impact on home life was

reputedly immediate, as the following extract taken from the Yorkshire Post of 1913 shows:

To-day when a mother wants a job done in the house which requires the handy use of chisel, hammer and screws, it is to her big boy she appeals, not to her husband, because her boys are much more skilled in such tasks than the father whose vocation lies outside these lines.<sup>20</sup>

In 1912-13 Foxford Day School came under the County of Warwick's jurisdiction although it is now part of Coventry. Extracts from the Horticultural Advisor's report on the school for that year show that he was satisfied with what he found: 'Plans of the garden and cropping have been drawn to scale ... Diaries and observation notes have been kept, also notes on the cultivation of each crop'.<sup>21</sup> Clearly work in the garden was being integrated with other subjects such as technical drawing, art and arithmetic. The most interesting example came from the latter of these, which produced a profit and loss account, the like of which seems to have been generally absent from girl's schooling. Furthermore there was some successful co-working with the girls in the garden, as they were partly responsible for the 'excellent' flower plot.

A Teacher's Lesson Book from the boys department of Holy Trinity National School for the year 1907-8 also covers practical instructions for the raising of a variety of vegetables, although it is not clear whether there was access to a garden in which to put these to use.<sup>22</sup> More interesting in some respects are the lessons devoted to instilling moral fibre into the boys and appropriate standards of conduct. A lesson on 26 August 1907 for Class Two was devoted to 'A recent occurrence' and dealt with the Godiva Legend as featured in the Hospital Carnival. Godiva's sacrifice in riding naked through the city to relieve the people of her husband's oppressive taxes was made much of, and other lessons in a

similar vein included, for instance, a notable disaster at sea in which the sailors perished in order that the women and children could make their escape in the life rafts.

In terms of training which could be applied to future purchasing decisions, or the management of income, the 1927 Handbook of Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools represented a giant step forward from earlier editions.<sup>23</sup> It recommends the explanation of credit and hire purchase agreements, the operation of profit margins and different kinds of interest, as well as the benefits of thrift.<sup>24</sup> It suggests culling information from newspaper advertisements to work on; sets children to calculate the cost of papering or carpeting a room; and girls to the planning of weekly, monthly and yearly family expenditure or enquiring into the cost of decorating and furnishing a home or estimating the outlay on a holiday. *All children* should be taught to keep simple accounts. The impact of the agitators for improved standards in design is evident in all sections relating to art and handwork, as for instance:

Opportunities will frequently occur in the drawing course for the consideration of beauty of form and colour in the things drawn, and the lessons will thus furnish a real training of taste ... Mean and ugly things will be studiously avoided, and only those will be drawn which are well-shaped, well-constructed, and well-fitted for their purpose; while, if the objects are ornamented in any way, the choice will fall on those in which artistic taste is shown both in form and colouring.<sup>25a</sup>

Similarly in handwork 'it has been found that the best results are obtained from the sparing use of the simplest forms of ornament, and any tendency to over-elaboration should be consistently discouraged'.<sup>26</sup>

Quite apart from the cultivation of prescribed aesthetic standards,

Coventry schoolchildren were exposed to the commercial charms of giants such as Lever Bros.. In 1931 four thousand small visitors to Port Sunlight were subjected to the full 'PR' experience of 'fifty-four sixty-ton pans of liquid Sunlight and Lifebuoy soap, seething and bubbling volcanically', 'glacial rivers of Lux', and Vim tins 'being made at the rate of 250,000 every day' for use in 'kitchens as far removed as Surbiton and Hong Kong'.<sup>27</sup> The description comes from the newspaper reporter who covered the event, but it barely does justice to the show the company provided, and its impact on future consumers can only be wondered at !

#### ***Media: Radio***

The popularity of radio in the period was such that the number of licences issued nationally equalled the number of homes wired for electricity by the end of the 1930s. Cecil Chisholm's Marketing Survey gives the number of Coventry homes covered by a wireless licence in 1937 as seventy-nine per cent, and this had risen to eighty-two per cent by 1938.<sup>28</sup> In both cases, the number of licences exceeded the number of homes wired for electricity. Any failure of enthusiasm for this product would have been strange in a city where two major local employers, British Thompson Houston and the General Electric Company, were involved in the manufacture of wireless installations.

The didactic power of radio had been seized upon by Sir John Reith, the Director General of the B.B.C., who assumed a mandate 'to carry into the greatest number of homes everything that was best in every department of human knowledge, endeavour and achievement'.<sup>29</sup> Design propogandists similarly spotted an opportunity and broadcasts such as the series of half hour discussions arranged in co-operation with the Design and Industries Association and broadcast in 1933, were the result. These covered everything from clothes, the printed word, the street, to 'The Living Room

and Its Furniture', and attempted to inculcate sound aesthetic judgement, environmental awareness and a generally modernist ethos into the listening masses.<sup>30</sup>

The Reverend Cecil Northcott was involved with the provision of handicraft training for unemployed Lancashire men and claimed some success for radio programmes such as these. According to him, 'a lot of cherished ugly things have been swept off the mantelpiece because somebody on the wireless said they were tawdry'.<sup>31</sup> However, such broadcasts remained a rarity. Ninety-nine per cent of the B.B.C. National, Regional and Local Programmes to which Coventrian listeners had access were made up of music. My trawl through the weekly Radio Times listings for the mid-1930s suggests that it would be an assiduous listener who scanned the airwaves with enough frequency and enough patience to glean anything from such isolated 'gems' as Eric Newton's six part series 'The Artist and his Public', Lady Alicia Amherst's guide to the 'Gardens round our [stately] Homes', or the ideas of William Morris in 'Men and Machines'.<sup>32</sup>

Far more likely to exert an influence of any sort on shoppers were the broadcasts of European commercial radio stations. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge noted that:

B.B.C. programmes were still too serious for a large part of the population; on Sundays they were gloomily puritanical and almost everyone then switched across to Radio Luxemburg and Radio Normandie, stations which gave light popular music and variety turns, *sponsored by advertisers.*<sup>33</sup>

The loss in revenue caused by the diversion of advertising budgets to these populist radio stations, whose programmes were actually made in London, was sufficient to provoke retaliatory measures from the British press barons, but Radio Luxemburg survived until 1939.



### *Sales staff*

In another place, and in another period (1890), social commentator Lady Jeune drew attention to the positive effect on sales of greater numbers of female sales staff. She spoke, it should be noted as a satisfied customer, rather than a gleeful manager, and her reasoning was as follows:

The other reason for the increased temptation to spend money is the large numbers of women which are now employed ... women are so much quicker than men, and they understand so much more readily what other women want; they can enter into the little troubles of their customers; they can fathom the agony of despair as to the arrangement of colours, the alternative trimmings, the duration of a fashion, the depths of a woman's purse, and, more important than all, the question of the becomingness of a dress, or a combination of material, to the wearer.<sup>34</sup>

Of course, the almost intuitive skills she attributed to these assistants - the ability to interpret wishes, to gauge means, to bring about a sympathetic match between product and patron - were all culturally defined and had their parallel within the private domestic sphere of the home. They were also being applied in a fashion department where women's expertise was less likely to be challenged. Nevertheless, to the extent that these skills were perceived to exist, women customers might arguably have welcomed their application in a greater range of retail settings. During the inter-war period, for instance, women's insights might have facilitated sales not just in furnishings and fancy goods, but in the expanding realm of household technology. Yet there are few signs that this was happening.

Despite the impetus given to women's employment by the First World War, employment opportunities in the whole tertiary sector (including shops) only expanded slowly both nationally and in Coventry between 1911

and 1931.<sup>35</sup> Apart from the armies of women employed in large department stores in metropolitan centres, retailing remained an overwhelmingly male occupation.

Table X compares the picture of male and female employment in the distribution trades in Coventry in relation to the broader picture of employment locally, and local population growth in the periods 1936/37 and 1939/40. The figures for distribution workers are partly taken from Coventry City Council publications and it is unclear whether these are insured workers only. The picture is further confused by the fact that distribution represents a wider category of workers than sales staff alone. They therefore need to be interpreted with caution, but provide a useful addition to census data which suffers from the problems already enumerated.

The table reveals that whereas the number of women employed in the distributive trades in Coventry increased between 1936/37 and 1939/40, the number of men increased almost twice as fast. The proportion of women to men declined over the period and by the end of the Thirties you were less likely to be served by a woman than you would have been three years previously. This situation is partly explained by the availability of alternative employment opportunities for women in Coventry, particularly once the rearmament drive had begun. A 1937 MOH report comments on the shortage of women war workers.<sup>36</sup> The demand for women workers did not only come from the factory shopfloor; Coventry had a higher than national average proportion of women in clerical posts too.<sup>37</sup> A range of status and earnings requirements could therefore be satisfied within the city's industrial sector. The kind of woman whose pretensions to respectability would prevent her from taking employment in domestic service or the factory, was more likely to seek office work than shop work. The service sector was in any case underdeveloped as a result of the local economy's

bias towards manufacturing.<sup>39</sup> There were already 3,690 female clerical workers in Coventry in 1931; whereas the figures for female shopworkers had only reached 2,349 by 1939/40.<sup>39</sup>

Table X. Pattern of male and female involvement in distribution in Coventry, 1936/37 and 1939/40

		1936/37	1939/40	% change
i	Total employed adult workers	78,523	94,575	+ 20%
ii	Total adults employed in distribution	4,437	7,215	+ 63%
iii	ii. as a % of i.	5.7%	7.6%	+1.9%
iv	Total employed adult males	62,223	76,238	+ 23%
v	iv. as a % of i.	79%	81%	+ 2%
vi	Total employed adult females	16,300	18,337	+ 12%
vii	vi. as a % of i.	21%	19%	- 2%
viii	Men employed in distribution	2,754	4,866	+ 77%
ix	viii. as a % of ii.	62%	67%	+ 5%
x	viii. as a % of iv.	4.4%	6.4%	+ 2%
xi	Women employed in distribution	1,683	2,349	+ 40%
xii	xi. as a % of ii.	38%	33%	- 5%
xiii	xi. as a % of vi.	10%	13%	+ 3%
xiv	Juveniles employed in distribution	1,202	1,590	+ 32%
xv	Population of Coventry	194,110	224,247	+ 16%
xvi	Ratio of distribution workers to population	1:44	1:31	+ 30%
xvii	Ratio of female distribution workers to population	1:115	1:95	+ 17%
xviii	Ratio of male distribution workers to population	1:70	1:46	+ 34%
xix	Ratio of female to male distribution workers	1:1.6	1:2	- 25%

Sources: 1937 and 1939 editions of City of Coventry, Directory of Coventry Manufacturers; C. Chisholm (ed.), Marketing Survey (1937), p.145; and Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.67.

The camaraderie valued by women factory workers was also in stark contrast to the isolation experienced by individual women sales staff working under the unrelenting gaze of a male supervisor. Mrs. B was a shopworker before she married and moved to Coventry in 1934. She described the boredom and frustration of having to maintain the pretence of activity for her boss when there were no customers for hours at a time, and her fury at being accused of not really trying in the fortnight before she left to get married because of a sale lost despite her utmost efforts to secure it.<sup>40</sup>

In this watershed period relations between customers and sales staff in different sectors of the retail trade must have been undergoing a difficult and uneven process of re-negotiation and re-configuration. The increasing standardisation, pre-packaging and national advertising of a range of toiletries, foodstuffs and household products had diminished the role of 'expert' hitherto cherished by many small shop proprietors, but it was still possible for them to wield power and demand continuing respect in the face of competition from the incoming multiples. Margaret Stacey records that the owner of a traditional family chemist's shop in Banbury was said to have threatened to refuse service to any of 'his' customers seen entering a new branch of Boots in the town.<sup>41</sup>

Both Mr. and Mrs. B recall the extreme formality of shop life in the late twenties and early thirties. At this time Mr. B worked in 'a very nice shop doing a high-class trade including silk top hats' and was threatened with the sack for saying "Cheerio, sir!" to a departing customer who said "Cheerio young man!".<sup>42</sup> Mrs. B worked first in a shop in Lichfield that sold 'K shoes and all the Clarks and all the better made shoes', but standards seemed no more relaxed when she moved to Dolcis in Birmingham.<sup>43</sup> In the official history of Owen Owen which opened a department store in Coventry in 1937 as the first stage in its expansion

TELEPHONE 3531.

**THOMAS LEE**  
(COVENTRY) LTD.,

*PRINTERS & STATIONERS.*

Billheads	Payment Cards
Business Cards	Post Cards
Circulars	Programmes
Concert Tickets	Receipt Books
Duplicate Books	Statements
Envelopes	Tag Labels
Gummed Labels	Time Sheets
Handbills	Wages Bags
Letterheads	Whist Drive Cards

*All Office Supplies & Sundries*

QUOTATIONS BY RETURN POST.

**137, Spon St., Coventry.**

**Duplicate Books**

and

**. Carrier Bags .**

**FOR ALL TRADES.**



**THOMAS LEE (Coventry) LTD.,**

137, SPON STREET,

PHONE 3531.

**COVENTRY.**

On the left is the regular insertion of Thomas Lee Ltd., Printer and Stationer of Coventry, as it appeared in April 1929 in the parish paper of St. John the Baptist Church. On the right is the new version which appeared in May. This transition in advertising style is intriguing in view of the opinion expressed by Annie Cole about Coventry shops. She arrived in the city in 1937, but clearly carrier bags had arrived some time before.

policy, Ian Hargreaves relates that:

It is important to appreciate that not only the wealthy were accorded this respectful treatment. The accent on personal service seems to have been almost terrifying and customers still alive [in 1968] can recall being received like royalty even when they intended to purchase nothing more valuable than a few reels of cotton or a farthing packet of pins.<sup>44</sup>

On the other hand Annie Cole who arrived in Coventry in the same year was astonished at her treatment at the hands of two local sales women:

I'd seen a jumper in the window. So I went to the counter and there were two girls talking. They never even looked up. Eventually one of them nudged the other and she came forward and I said "err". She says, "oh". I said, "You might as well go back to your friend. I wanted to know the price of the jumper in the window but don't bother if you're busy."

She compared this experience with her own sales training and the very different standards of behaviour that pertained in the retail environment with which she was familiar:

It was quite a shock to us coming from Glasgow, which is very hospitable. When you went shopping they always tied your parcel up with paper and string. Here you were given a carrier bag. That was somewhat shattering to me. I walked into a big store and of course they always held the door open. Everything was geared for comfort and the customer. I worked in a book shop, a very high class bookshop. You were taught all the little courtesies so it was a change to go into a shop which was "take it or leave it". That was my impression of Coventry.<sup>45</sup>

It may be coincidental, but the pattern of advertising in the 1920s by a local stationery company (illustrated) gives substance to her complaint!

It was no wonder perhaps that the Retail Sector of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce saw fit to establish a Retail Traders Advisory Committee in the early part of 1939 'to consider the setting up of courses of study for assistants in the distributive trades of Coventry'. At a meeting towards the middle of the year it was announced that 'As a result of these investigations, classes are being arranged by the Coventry Technical College which are specifically designed to meet the requirements of assistants in all the distributive trades and include a study of salesmanship and commodities'. The announcement was accompanied by a plea for employers' co-operation in influencing their staff to take advantage of this training facility, and the observation that:

The advantages which accrue to the employer in return for his assistance are obvious in these days when increased competition and higher standards of training make such a heavy demand on both employer and employee. The need for trained and qualified personnel was never so essential as today.<sup>46</sup>

As the keenest sense of competition was aroused by the incoming multiples, it would seem that this innovation was a direct response to their in-house training of sales staff, or a recognition that where competition on price alone could not be countenanced, higher standards of service could go a long way towards retaining existing customers and attracting new ones.

The extent to which a man, trained or otherwise, on the other side of the counter would reassure the intending customer was probably determined by the nature of the shopping trip. Where the items being sought were personal, or small items for the home, women's or children's clothing, or foodstuffs, or where the purpose of the visit was primarily sociable - involving the exchange of gossip - a woman's presence might well be acceptable or even preferable. But where the items were large, expensive or technical, a male presence was almost certainly reassuring; if

purchasing decisions needed to be sanctioned by a man, even retrospectively, the words of advice of the man in the shop would have constituted a useful persuasive mechanism, in a way that the words of a woman wouldn't.

The caricatured furniture salesman presented by Richard Hoggart in The Uses of Literacy is somewhat overblown, but worth reproducing here because it contains a kernel of truth:

With their neat ready-made clothing, shiny though cheap shoes, well-creamed hair and ready smiles [the salesmen] are meant to represent an ethos. One buys the suggestion of education and elegance with the furniture ... But though they are obviously very smart and 'real educated', and though they insist on calling every young wife 'madam', they are also - it is their most effective quality - 'ever so nice and friendly' ...

The proprietors realise that w-c people will be dazzled by the exuberance and glitter of their display, will be attracted and yet a little awed. The manner of their salesmen is usually, therefore, understandingly colloquial; not the 'now, ma' of the fairground salesman, but 'I know what it's like, madam,' or 'I had a young couple just like you in only last week'; all in the tone of an understanding son who has done well and become cultured.<sup>47</sup>

The Ws' answer when asked why they chose the shop they did to purchase their suite, suggested that the availability of advice *to which they could relate* was a significant factor in securing the sale.<sup>48</sup> Certainly when Mrs. W stressed that it was a three-seater settee, and it had 'spring cushions, you know, the round spring cushions', and Mrs. Ru related that her's was 'an exhibition suite', it seemed to me that I could almost hear the distant echo of the salesman all those years before.<sup>49</sup>



### ***Media: Cinema***

The 1929 advent of talking cinema only enhanced the already strong appeal of this most democratic of leisure activities. Even the poor are reputed to have found pennies for the pictures, and proprietors in depressed areas were obliged to reduce charges to stay in business. By 1937 twenty million people visited the cinema each week, of whom forty per cent were estimated to visit once and twenty-five per cent to visit twice a week or more.<sup>50</sup>

In terms of stimulating material wishes, the visual evidence provided by the cinema clearly gave it an edge over the radio, and the images on offer were overwhelmingly American; the product of Hollywood. The quotas of British films imposed by the Cinematograph Act of 1927 were too small to induce serious investment in 'home-grown' film-making, and the resulting 'quota quickies' had a poor reputation and were instantly forgotten. The power and allure of Hollywood was something quite different, and the very real impact it had on people's lives is undeniable. The men and women who wrote letters to Jackie Stacey about their early female film idols were transported back forty, fifty, sixty years, and expressed their gratitude again and again, just for being given the opportunity to reminisce.<sup>51</sup>

The reminiscences collected by Stacey reveal that the silver screen's occupants were not necessarily experienced as distant and 'other', even when the illusory charms of the cinema interior and the filmsetting were recognised ('They took me away to some wonderful places', 'A real good story that one could lose oneself in').<sup>52</sup> The *real* business in hand was *personal identification*. No matter how large the supporting cast, or the audience, the stars and the plot in which they were involved were experienced in a very immediate way:

'I could imagine myself in the girl's place while sitting in the dark', 'I studied dance at one time ... It was me on the screen',

'I loved to watch [X]. I put myself in her place'.<sup>53</sup>

Shared characteristics became a focus for identification:

'I admired her acting and her looks, and of course we shared the same Christian name', 'Hollywood greats ? [X] - she had the only hair style I could imitate', 'Another favourite was [X]. For one thing, she was about my age', 'We share the same birthday, and I was told many times around that time that I looked like her.'<sup>54</sup>

This process of identification was actively encouraged by the promoters, who pursued a strategy of 'revelation' to make the stars more real to their fans. Through the constant flow of interviews, articles and promotional pieces that appeared in newspapers and dedicated journals the stars were simultaneously hyped and de-mystified; a successful synthesis that only enhanced their appeal. This extract from a 1920s publication (probably Red Letter) typifies this type of writing:

It is very interesting to note the hobbies of famous people. Patsy Ruth Miller's favourite pastime is making wool rugs. She has made many of very intricate designs and is now busy on some very lovely ones for her new Hollywood home ... Leatrice Joy spends her spare time embroidering dainty frocks for her little daughter.<sup>55</sup>

It provides confirmation that film actresses shared with other women the preoccupations of home-making and motherhood and this resonates in several significant ways. It improves the stars' credibility and therefore adds to their appeal; it elevates the status of these domestic occupations by association; and it increases the stars' capacity to stimulate sales by the following logic: if X is a wife and mother as well as having access to the best of everything, then her opinion on Y product must be worth hearing.

Celebrity endorsements validated much more than products, they validated aspirations. Readers who bought magazines to find out 'all about

the stars, what they were doing. Romance in their lives, what movies they were making', formed a bond with their idols based in part on a perception of shared domestic roles which effectively transcended boundaries of wealth, nationality and lifestyle.<sup>56</sup> Film actors and actresses were more than 'real', they were endorsed as close personal acquaintances:

'After that I followed her career ... but not ... to the exclusion of all my other "movie friends"', 'They were like people we knew through the film roles they played', 'When these actors and actresses died ... I felt as if I had lost one of my family.'<sup>57</sup>

In a two way process the stars were brought closer to their audience, whilst the audience was encouraged by commercial interests to believe it could share the stars' experience through purchasing certain products:

'I felt like a film star using Lux Toilet Soap advertised as the stars' soap. A lipstick called Kissproof, and also Tangee lipstick used by the stars until Max Factor took over.'

'In those days young girls all tried to look as glamorous. Lux Toilet Soap with a star's picture on label. Max Factor lipsticks.'<sup>58</sup>

Emulation was mostly about appearance and the acquisition of a set of standards of behaviour:

'She seemed to epitomise the kind of person, who, with luck, I as a child/teenager could aspire to be', 'an all-American girl who seemed to be the epitome of all I would have liked to be myself', 'We learnt how to dress, make up and act or should I say behave from our female stars'.<sup>59</sup>

But there were considerable consequences in terms of material possessions and expenditure decisions. These items were all specifically mentioned by Jackie Stacey's respondents: the film magazines themselves, scrapbooks for cuttings, albums for pictures, frames for autographed photographs, film annuals, musical scores, collections of cigarette cards, make-up and

toiletries, clothes, singing and dancing lessons, and names for houses. The 'public craving for the atmosphere of the cinema' was identified by Nikolaus Pevsner as one of the possible causes for the lamentable state of popular taste in home furnishings.<sup>50</sup> Branson and Heinemann credit the cinema with setting the popular fashion in 'hairstyles, clothes, and Christian names, begetting generations of Marlenes, Shirleys and Garys'.<sup>51</sup> Whilst the authors of Dunroamin' felt that 'Hollywood influence in fashion and hair styles did not extend to breakfast china or the decoration on the lampshade'.<sup>52</sup> The Mass Observation team who prepared their 1943 Enquiry Into People's Homes noted that:

In view of the frequency with which refrigerators figure in American films, surprisingly few people ... suggested them as desirable adjuncts to the food storage facilities.<sup>53</sup>

The following commentary notes the incongruity of the idea that the cinema could have any possible impact on the ordinary fan in the 1930s:

The filmgoer would be subjected to scenes of the screen idols romping in opulent surroundings, lounging by private swimming pools, cuddling well groomed pooches wearing diamond studded collars, or wandering through their forty-bedroomed mansions. Then the cinema patron would return to his rented two-up, two-down, straight in off the pavement abode, swig back a mug of "Epps" cocoa, crawl into a bug-infested bed, and doze off no doubt dreaming that tomorrow may be the day he finds a job!<sup>54</sup>

But it falls into the trap of conflating 1930s with Depression. In Coventry, the proprietors of "Hildots" ladies and children's hairdressers on the Binley Road deemed a Hollywood inspired shopfitting aesthetic worth investing in (see illustration), and Phyllis Baldock of Tile Hill Lane told her customers to 'bring along your favourite's latest hair style: we will copy it for you'.<sup>55</sup>

Contemporary opinions differed on whether the influence of Hollywood was a good thing. The Times of 17 June 1931 reported that the National Council of Women's conference had discussed the undesirable effect of American films. Lady Northumbria had referred to Hollywood as the fountainhead from which 'filth had been pouring'. The conference resolved to establish a consultative committee to 'foster the highest possible moral and aesthetic standards in films produced and exhibited in this country'. However, The Times of 24 August 1933, reporting the words of Mr Trevor Fenwick, of Messrs. Fenwick Limited of Newcastle-on-Tyne and New Bond Street, reflected the view that 'Women knew that Hollywood was nearly always "style-right"'.

### **Church**

The parish magazine of St. John's presents a snapshot view of the Church's response to the dilemma of social change and the threat of diminishing spirituality. An article published in 1925 defines home as 'our greatest social asset' and the family as 'the highest result of the historic process of social evolution', and goes on to rail against 'the modern spirit of individualistic selfishness' and 'the love of the two-seater in preference to the perambulator'.<sup>66</sup> A 1929 contribution displays vehemently anti-modernist sentiments and refers to the danger posed by 'modern commercial methods, with the huge fungus growth of organization',<sup>67</sup> whilst in 1930 parishioners are asked to 'compare our giving with the amount we spend on amusements, or upon tobacco, or chocolates, or upon petrol'.<sup>68</sup> Yet the magazine itself is run on a commercial basis; carries advertisements for a range of goods designed to cater for needs well beyond those of food, clothes and warmth; and in other ways acts as a barometer for the increasing materialism of urban life.

Between 1914 and 1930 advertisements for the following items were featured alongside the more prosaic announcements from coal merchants, grocers, and clothiers: 'All parts for model aeroplane making kept in stock. Meccano sets from 2/- to £5', 'Dolls, Toys, Games and Novelties of Every Description', 'Agent for Royal Doulton, Royal Worcester, Crown Derby, Coalport and Minton', 'Floral Skin Cream', 'Ladies' Underwear, Hosiery and Gloves', 'The Colson Hat', 'The Dexter Weather Coat', 'Wolsey Jumper Suits', 'Ladies Wrist Watches a Speciality', not to mention 'Crazy Paving and Rock Work Undertaken'.<sup>69</sup> As the 1930s opened the Parish itself began to produce items for sale. These included an almanack and a blotter.<sup>70</sup>

The increasing value of gifts given to departing associates of St. John's testifies to an abatement of the idea that rewards were reserved for heaven. In November 1928 it was announced that Sister Annie would receive a portable British Thomson Houston wireless set, bearing a silver plate suitably inscribed. In August 1929 it was made known that Canon Simpson's gift would be an oak 'Compactum Wardrobe', whilst Miss Balston would receive a quartered mahogany bureau, both with silver plates. The remaining money would be enough to buy the Canon 'books, or a portable typewriter or anything definite and personal'. The August 1930 edition carried a letter of thanks from Rev. G.H.K Pedley for his 'handsome bookcase' and his wife's sewing machine.

Meanwhile, parishioners' fancies were regularly being tempted by stalls selling household linen, fancy and useful items, household articles, and knick-knacks at Missionary and other sales; a Church House without clocks was deemed too austere ('the mantlepices appear very bare without them'); and the organisation of house-to-house collections for the 'Coventry New Churches Building Fund' conjures up an image of keen church types out-knocking the door-to-door salesmen.<sup>71</sup>

## *Workplace*

The first edition of the Journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce for 1932 advised manufacturers and retailers of the availability of a modestly priced set of twenty-six posters of striking design intended to bring home to workpeople the advantages of buying British whenever possible. An instance is given of one which shows a football match with the slogan 'Every British purchase is a Score for British Employment - Buy British and Secure Your Job'.<sup>72</sup> The absence of subtlety here almost amounts to blackmail! Two items in the 'Loudspeaker', the works' magazine of the GEC, do the same job rather more deftly. In 1933 a poem was published entitled 'The Vicious Circle':

When someone stops buying,

    Someone stops selling.

When someone stops selling,

    Someone stops making.

When someone stops making,

    Someone stops working.

When someone stops working,

    Someone stops earning.

When someone stops earning,

    Someone stops buying.<sup>73</sup>

At Christmas 1935 employees contemplating the purchase of a radio set for Christmas were told where to obtain order forms and urged to remind fellow citizens when radio was mentioned that 'every sale of a GEC Radio Set means a week's work for several people in Coventry'.<sup>74</sup>

Works' magazines functioned to stimulate materialism in other ways. They carried 'For Sale' notices which put potential sellers and buyers in touch with one another, and in the case of the Alfred Herbert 'News' they described gifts given to couples on the occasion of their marriages. The

'Thanks' column for July/August 1935 typically carries thanks from Mr H.B. of the Grinding Department for his oak chiming clock; from Mr W.T.F. of the Drawing Office to friends on the staff for the china cabinet, friends in the table tennis club for the electric clock, and friends from the Motor club for the reading lamp; from Mr J.R.C. to friends of the Detail Inspection Department for the canteen of cutlery; and from Miss G.K (now Mrs B) to friends of the Grinding Department, the Filing Department and staff for the Lloyd Loom basket and chair, pictures and grandson clock. Mr X, who worked in engineering firms in Coventry throughout the 1930s endorsed the view that a present was always given as part of the ritual of sending off a work mates to get married.<sup>75</sup> The 'Loudspeaker' congratulated newly married couples but did not include details of gifts. However its cryptic 'We Wonder?' column casts light on all sorts of employees' habits, as for example in January 1933: 'We wonder ... where Bill got his new outfit, and ... if another staff man took full advantage of the sales ... how many of our ladies have been shopwindow searching during January?'<sup>76</sup>

### *Shop exteriors*

In a somewhat delayed response to the intensification of retail competition in Coventry due to the arrival of the multiples, a half page advertisement appeared in the March/April 1937 edition of the Chamber of Commerce 'Journal' from 'Coventry's Own Shopfitters', F.G. Plumb & Sons Ltd., of West Orchard, who asked 'Retailers, may we submit a design and estimate for your new shop front?'. This marked a diversification in trade, as Plumbs are listed in a mid-1930s street directory as plumbers. Their concern with improving the visual appeal of the city's retail frontages was somewhat pre-empted by the Priory Electric Service, makers of neon signs, who begged business owners not to be 'five years behind the times in



benefitting from these improvements' in the (1935) Coventry Silver Jubilee Handbook. Priory were responsible for the neon work above the Empress Buildings, the arcade of shops on the Binley Road; and therefore probably also inspired or produced the neon above "Hildots", the hairdressers mentioned earlier, who formed part of the arcade.

The developers of these new facilities showed an awareness of the best modern thinking on shop design and appeared to generate a 'trickle down' response from the tenants of individual units within them. This appears to be in stark contrast to the tenants of older retail properties who were noted in late 1937 as having been slow to avail themselves of the facility offered by the recent Tenant's Charter to carry out work to upgrade structures and charge the owners.<sup>77</sup>

The remarkable thing is that this may actually have been to their commercial advantage. One of the unexpected findings of the Coventry Sociological Survey begun in 1949 was the marked preference of shoppers for one older, unplanned shopping area over another newer, purpose-built arcade.<sup>78</sup> The latter boasted twenty-four shops with wide frontages of about twenty feet, was set back from the main road, designed as a coherent entity, and included branches of some multiples. Its competitor comprised seventy-seven shops invariably converted from older terraced housing with narrower frontages of twelve to fifteen feet, which had evolved on an ad hoc basis along the route of one of the city's older arterial roads. The diversity of signs and advertisements, the sprawl of goods onto the pavement, and the windows cluttered with products combined to give an air of businesslike hustle and bustle that appeared to have much greater appeal than the rather rarified atmosphere of its newer neighbour.

Terence Young made the same observation in Becontree in 1934; describing the atmosphere of traditional London shopping streets as having 'a glamour and an attractive noise about [them]', and noting the 'pathetic

attempts' being made in newly developed Becontree shopping centres to recapture this quality. The attempts failed because 'the whole scale, both of noise and crowd, is too small for it to be really effective'.<sup>79</sup>

### *Being neighbourly*

The power of the neighbourhood to regulate behaviour and adjudge status has long been a motif of commentaries on working-class culture. Recognition that a very few houses indeed might denote a 'neighbourhood' came later on. The absolute need for neighbourliness and neighbourly approval was a result of poverty and precarious household survival; as margins of disposable income grew, the old social forms were under pressure to evolve. In the inter-war suburbs older forms of neighbourliness and new expressions of independence and respectability were thrown into conflict and were sometimes the cause of deep tensions among groups of people thrown together by new patterns of housing and lacking a history of mutual dependence or shared acquaintance. It is worth remembering that when Coventry's would-be planners commissioned the assistance of a sociological team from the University of Birmingham in 1949, Hoggart's Uses of Literacy had not been published, nor had Rowntree's English Life and Labour, and the printer's ink was barely dry on the work of Mass Observation.<sup>80</sup> In this light their observations about the city's inter-war housing estates are of particular interest.

The first homes in one area surveyed by the team were built just before the Second World War and in 1949 were occupied mainly by the young families of men involved in engineering. Nevertheless the researchers noted that there was a range of occupations and incomes, and people varied in their residential aspirations.<sup>81</sup> Of the twenty-nine changes of tenancy in this area, twenty-eight had been from houses in the more intimate space of the cul-de-sac and square, only one from the more independently sited

houses.<sup>82</sup> The team recorded that 'the maintenance of a large area of privacy, of reserve, is synonymous with "better class"', and 'one of the marks of high social status is the degree of reserved bearing to neighbours'.<sup>83</sup> The effort to marginalise neighbours was frustrated when the planning and siting of homes threw them into unwanted visual or physical contact with one another.

Sharp distinctions were drawn between very occasional borrowing from one other household (acceptable) and habitual borrowing and lending between many households (unacceptable); and between formal invitations for a sociable cup of tea (acceptable), and constant uninvited popping in and out (unacceptable). The researchers seemed surprised that their respondents 'reject the possibility of friendship with neighbours'.<sup>84</sup> And in what could be interpreted as a throwback to the needs of earlier neighbouring patterns, with their gendered models of household responsibility, the team noted that 'the materialist approach is particularly marked among the women' and that the men were more concerned with maintaining privacy and preventing intrusions from neighbours.<sup>85</sup>

Even without the fundamental needs that had fuelled neighbouring practices hitherto, the purpose of sociability remained the regulation of status. The researchers recorded the existence of 'an intricate system of assessing status by the physical structure of the house, its gables, bay windows (both single and double) and other appurtenances. The degree of detachment is important ... The system of tenure is also relevant'.<sup>86</sup> They also noted that where house type and tenure were the same 'attention is necessarily focused on the contents, the material possessions'.<sup>87</sup>

Under these circumstances shopping practices became hotly contested territory. Some of the residents expressed the view that going shopping together was undesirable (low-class) because 'people get to know your business'.<sup>88</sup> Suggesting that goods cost more than they did was enough to

disrupt neighbourly relations, whilst being 'found out' for using HP having implied by your behaviour that it was beneath you was the source of malicious amusement.<sup>89</sup> Strivers were marked out and subjected to a campaign of retribution that must have made life very uncomfortable for those with pretensions to material comfort, and possibly accounts for the high levels of removals.

The following comments are examples of the method used to rigorously regulate both status and the behaviour of status-seekers:

She strikes me as the type who's not used to much.<sup>90</sup>

Some of them looked like gypsies when they came up here, but now they are all high and mighty with their posh clothes.<sup>91</sup>

Look at that; they had nothing when they came up here. They're getting on very nicely, I must say.<sup>92</sup>

[X] is always ... talking about how much money he has in the bank - the things they've got, and that he gets paid 9s 6d an hour. Perhaps he hasn't been used to anything before.<sup>93</sup>

Mrs. N was mortified in early married life to overhear comments from neighbours along the lines of 'Where does she think she's swanning off to in her silk stockings?', when she was actually going to help her disabled mother. She was far too shy to offer any riposte, and in any case, the group had effectively disempowered her by not speaking to her directly. The couple had also felt constrained to furnish the hall of their new home before any other part of the house so that it appeared respectable when the front door was opened.<sup>94</sup>

### ***Abroad***

This chapter started by looking at socialisation within the confines of the home. It closes by looking at the behaviour of young people, especially young men, moving beyond the home. If the shopping and selection

practices of working-class women have been denied critical attention until very recently, except in circumstances where poverty has brought them to the attention of middle-class investigators, then working-class men's shopping and selection practices have to all intents and purposes been deemed non-existent. Yet there are good reasons for believing them to be knowledgeable and practised users of retail environments.

Shops provided part-time employment to large numbers of boys who swept floors, made deliveries and stacked shelves to earn money whilst still at school; and first jobs for many male school leavers unable to secure one of the dwindling numbers of industrial apprenticeships. Mr X related how many boys went to a local gelatine factory after leaving school and 'Some'd go errand boys for some of the bigger shops with the carrier bikes .., they all employed errand boys 'cause you could get anything delivered, groceries or fish, food or anything like that'.<sup>95</sup>

Shops were not, therefore, a mystery to large numbers of young men, nor did they cease to be important in later teenage years. Andrew Davies's work on Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-Class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939 reveals the coincidence of many of the local 'monkey runs' where young people promenaded on Sunday evenings with shopping streets. Not only that, some of his respondents identified the key role played by shop windows in the art of 'clicking'.

You'd just chat 'em up ... she might have been looking in a window ... and you'd just go and start chatting, "Do you fancy that, love ?" and all this.<sup>96</sup>

You'd be looking round and looking round ... then we'd walk a bit more and we'd look again, then all at once we'd go into a shop window. Well invariably they'd come up to the shop window to us.<sup>97</sup>

A Coventry interviewee identified one local 'bunny run' with the Foleshill

Road, another well established shopping thoroughfare running into the city from the north-east.<sup>99</sup>

Saturday night's entertainment was just as likely to focus on another shopping environment, that of the market. Davies cites C.E.B Russell's account of Manchester youth's leisure time activities in which he describes the enormous pull of Shudehill market for young men wishing to stroll about and be sociable, with the added lure of a bargain thrown in.<sup>99</sup> Lest it be argued that more attention was being paid to other young people in these situations than to potential purchases, Davies also makes it clear beyond any doubt that when money was available young men were keen followers of fashion:

If you could afford it, you had trousers with a twenty-four inch bottom, with an inch turn-up. And if they were anything under twenty-four inches, you didn't want to know them. That was the fashion. You also used to have your hair cut in a special style, what they call a "jazzers'" haircut. And if you went dancing, that was the recognised rig-out. Bell bottom trousers with a twenty-four inch bottom, and a haircut to match ... The hat was a stetson. And the one that I wore was what they call an "at-a-boy". That was like a stetson and you pulled it low down, like a gangster effect. And a black belt, and a short belted overcoat.<sup>100</sup>

Hannah Andrassy's work in a recent MA thesis has amplified this theme, showing how synthetic fabrics, mass-production, mass-retailing and home-knitting combined to shape a distinctive and accessible young male fashion well in advance of 1950's teenage style.<sup>101</sup>

Photographs of Coventry in the 1930s show the city centre streets teeming with men, going to work, coming from work, and going about their business. Seebohm Rowntree's work on York (already mentioned) revealed the predisposition of men as well as women to visit stores simply to gaze.

In addition, the tables of leisure pursuits published in Poverty and Progress and reproduced in Appendix One, detail the fixed part shopping habits played in men's weekly routines. It is inconceivable that Coventry men failed to notice the contents of the window displays that surrounded them. By the end of the 1930s Coventry could boast one hundred and fourteen tailors in addition to forty-six gentlemen's outfitters as described in Chapter Two.<sup>102</sup> We know from Frank Mort that Burton's at least was a resolutely masculine space where women were unwelcome; men *must* have been visiting these establishments and having their measurements taken.<sup>103</sup>

## *Footnotes to Chapter Four*

0. F.M.L. Thompson, 'Social Control in Victorian Britain', in Economic History Review, XXXIV, 2 (1981), pp.189-208. In this piece of writing Thompson carries out the historical work of separating the two sociological concepts of socialisation and social control.
1. M.L. Eyles, The Woman in the Little House (1922), p.85.
2. M. Llewelyn Davies (ed), Life as We Have Known It 1931 (1977), p.4.
3. R. Hoggart, The Uses of Literacy 1957 (1971), p.40.
4. E. Ross, Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London, 1870-1918 (Oxford, 1993), pp.152-3.
5. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain, 1890-1960, p.91.
6. Hoggart, Uses of Literacy, p.40.
7. Transcript of interview with Mrs. R.
8. Ross, Love and Toil, pp.129-30.
9. Ross, Love and Toil, p.51.
10. See C. Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up in Late Victorian and Edwardian England (1981), p.84 and p.92.
11. Cited in Dyhouse, Girls Growing Up pp.89-90.
12. Ibid.
13. Coventry Standard, 4 February 1933; cited in F. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.176.
14. This paragraph draws heavily on Carr's work, see in particular pp.175-77.
15. Coventry Searchlight, November 1937; cited in Lancaster and Mason, 'Society and Politics in Twentieth Century Coventry' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour p.347.
16. File at Coventry Record Office (CRO) CCE/SCH/60/4/1.
17. A. Forty, Objects of Desire: Design and Society, 1750-1980 (1986), p.116.



18. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures pp.91-2.
19. Report to the School Board of London (n.d.), cited in Bourke, Working-Class Cultures p.92.
20. Ibid.
21. File at CRO CCE/SCH/75/5/1-5.
22. File at CRO CCE/SCH/97/1.
23. Great Britain, Board of Education, Handbook of Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools (1927), p.21. An earlier edition of the Handbook had been published in 1905.
24. See for example Handbook (1927), p.20, pp.200-01 and p.209.
25. Handbook (1927), p.305.
26. Handbook (1927), p.341.
27. File at CRO CCE/SCH/75/8/1-6. The newspaper is not identified.
28. C. Chisholm (ed.), Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom and Census of Purchasing Power Distribution (Business Publications Ltd., 1937), p.145. And Cecil Chisholm (ed.), Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom and Census of Purchasing Power Distribution (Business Publications Ltd., 1938), p.161.
29. J. Reith, Into the Wind (1949); cited in N. Branson and M. Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties (1973), p.274.
30. For details of the full series see R. Plummer, Nothing Need Be Ugly: The First Seventy Years of the Design and Industries Association (1985), p.38.
31. F. Greene (ed), Time To Spare (1935), p.116; cited in Bourke, Working-Class Cultures, pp.187-88.
32. Radio Times, January to April 1935.
33. R. Graves and A. Hodge The Long Weekend: A Social History of Great Britain, 1918-1939 1940 (1991), p.359.

34. Lady Jeune, 'The Ethics of Shopping' Fortnightly Review , January 1896; cited in A. Aldburgham, Shops and Shopping, 1800-1914 (1964), p.236.
35. J. Castle 'Factory Work for Women: Courtaulds and GEC between the wars' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.135.
36. See Lancaster, 'Migration into Twentieth Century Coventry' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.68.
37. D.W. Thoms and T. Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy, 1880-1980' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.27.
38. N. Tiratsoo, Reconstruction, Affluence and Labour Politics, Coventry 1945-60 (1990), p.7.
39. Thoms and Donnelly, 'Coventry's Industrial Economy', p.28; and City of Coventry, Coventry Manufacturers (1939).
40. Transcript of interview with Mrs B.
41. Stacey, Tradition and Change, p.30.
42. W. H. Barnes, I Came to Coventry (1994), p.15 and transcript of interview with Mr B.
43. Transcript of interview with Mrs B.
44. I. Hargreaves, They Always Come Back (Liverpool, 1968), p.10
45. A. Cole as related in Coventry Reminiscence Theatre, We Came To Coventry (1990), pp.86-87.
46. Journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, (July/August 1939), p.14.
47. Hoggart, Uses of Literacy, p.90.
48. Transcript of interview with Mrs W.
49. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs W and Mrs R.
50. Branson and Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, p.275.
51. I am especially grateful to Dr. Jackie Stacey for allowing me access to this archive of letters and questionnaires from over three hundred women gathered between 1987 and 1989.
52. JS/letters/GDA and JS/letters/KB.

53. JS/questionnaire/anon.; JS/questionnaire/anon.; JS/letters/JG.
54. JS/letters/MD; JS/letters/GB; JS/letters/GDA; JS/letters/PMO.
55. Scrapbook accompanying JS/letters/KF.
56. JS/questionnaire/anon..
57. JS/letters/VH; JS/letters/LD; JS/letters/BC.
58. JS/letters/VB; JS/questionnaires/anon..
59. JS/letters/BC; JS/letters/BF; JS/letters/EMH.
60. N. Pevsner, An Enquiry Into Industrial Art in England (Cambridge, 1937), p.32.
61. Branson and Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, p.275.
62. P. Bentley, I. Davis, P. Oliver, Dunroamin': the Suburban Semi and its Enemies (1981).
63. Mass Observation, An Enquiry Into People's Homes (1943), p.156.
64. J. Barker, R. Brown, W. Greer, Cinemas of Portsmouth (Milestone, Horndean, 1981), p.2.
65. The "Hildots" advertisement appeared in the 1935 (Silver Jubilee) City of Coventry Handbook, p.22. Phyllis Baldock advertisement (dated January 1936, no source given) reproduced in A. Douglas, Memories of Coventry: A Pictorial Record (Coventry, 1987), p.82.
66. S. John's Parish Magazine, August 1925.
67. S. John's Parish Magazine, July 1925.
68. S. John's Parish Magazine, March 1930.
69. S. John's Parish Magazine, various 1914-1930.
70. Announced in the editions of January and September 1930 respectively.
71. S. John's Parish Magazine, April 1928 and April 1929.
72. Journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, January/February 1932 , p.10.
73. GEC 'Loudspeaker', April 1933.
74. GEC 'Loudspeaker', December 1935.

75. Transcript at CRO 1647/1/1. ..
76. For other examples of retail observations and humour from the GEC 'Loudspeaker' and Alfred Herbert 'News', see Appendix Three.
77. Journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, September/October 1937, p.16.
78. See J. Hayes 'Convenience and Selectivity and the Planning of Neighbourhood Units' in P. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey, 1949-51' (manuscript), pp. 75 ff.. Also W. Burns, British Shopping Centres (1959), p.92.
79. T. Young, Becontree and Dagenham: The Story of the Growth of a Housing Estate (1934), p.103.
80. This is not to deny the existence of older styles of writing about the working-class such as that of G.D.H Cole, the Webbs and the Hammonds.
81. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.2.
82. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.3.
83. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.9 and p.13.
84. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.2.
85. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.7 and p.13.
86. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.14.
87. Ibid.
88. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.33.
89. This evidence from the same body of research is quoted in Kuper, Living In Towns, p.46 and p.67.
90. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', p.15.
91. Sargant Florence et al, 'Coventry Sociological Survey 1949-51', pp.11.
92. Kuper, Living In Towns, p.73.
93. Ibid.

94. Transcript of interview with Mrs. N.
95. Transcript of interview CRO 1647/1/1 (Mr X).
96. A. Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty: Working-class Culture in Salford and Manchester, 1900-1939 (Buckingham, 1992), p.103.
97. Ibid..
98. Transcript of interview held by CRO, 1647/1/2, woman born 1914, p. 18.
99. C.E.B. Russell, Manchester Boys: Sketches of Manchester Lads at Work and Play (1984 reprint), p.13; cited in Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty, p.136.
100. Davies, Leisure, Gender and Poverty, p.105.
101. Hannah Andrassy, 'Smart but casual: masculinity and the modernisation of men's fashions 1930-50' (MA thesis, Victoria & Albert Museum / Royal College of Art, 1995). Findings presented at V&A symposium 12.6.95.
102. Coventry Street Directory for 1937-38.
103. F. Mort and P. Thompson, 'Retailing, commercial culture and masculinity in 1950s Britain: The case of Montague Burton, the "Tailor of Taste"', History Workshop 38 (1994).

*CHAPTER FIVE*  
*Interactions with Coventry's*  
*retail environment*

Given the centrality of women's negotiation with the marketplace to the success, or otherwise, of household budgeting and domestic survival, a surprising vacuum exists in many accounts where one might have anticipated a more structured discussion. Histories of housework such as Caroline Davidson's A Woman's Work is Never Done have nothing to say about this aspect of women's household work which necessarily takes place outside the confines of the home. Related accounts such as Christina Hardyment's From Mangle to Microwave and Ellen Lupton's Mechanical Brides focus instead on the impact of technology on the domestic workplace and household tasks, thereby circumscribing housework in exactly the same way (*within* the home), and without ever detailing the complex process by which such 'aids' came to be absorbed into the home: the act(s) of purchase.<sup>1</sup> Despite the playful reference to product on the cover, and the introductory statement that "'Shopping" is one of the housewife's main work activities' , Ann Oakley's Housewife comes up with little more than the observations that shopping is regarded as being more pleasurable when time and money are in generous supply and when clothes or household goods are the focus of the trip rather than food.<sup>2</sup> Recent publications on women's history and working-class culture are no more helpful. Elizabeth Roberts's A Woman's Place has only two indexed references to shops or shopping, and Joanna Bourke's Working-Class Cultures in Britain has none.<sup>3</sup>

During the first quarter of the century a rash of feminist, or at least emancipatory, writings sought to mitigate the burden of domestic responsibilities traditionally assigned to women, but a similar absence is notable here. In the wake of the publication of Frederick Winslow Taylor's 1911 Principles of Scientific Management, many took their cue from this paean to industrial rationalisation. Much could be achieved, it was claimed, by the re-arrangement of fixtures and fittings, the re-organisation of tasks, and recourse to an expanding range of household

equipment. Christine Frederick exemplified this approach in her two books Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home and Selling Mrs Consumer, whilst her career development from women's ally to manufacturers' ally underlines the ambiguous position these new products as liberators/oppressors of women were destined to occupy.<sup>4</sup>

Women's movements throughout Europe enthusiastically took up these imported American ideas, with a concomitant reduction of the scope of liberation to the circumference of the kitchen's work surfaces. Here again, the mental and physical agility involved in the work of provisioning the household was seldom addressed. The British publication of Clementina Black's A New Way of Housekeeping (1918) represented a rare departure when it envisaged at least two partial solutions to these problems.<sup>5</sup> These were shared ordering and delivery of bulk food purchases by groups of co-operating households, and quantity ordering of products from wholesalers through an agent. She believed that in the fullness of time both of these approaches could be applied to working-class as well as middle-class households.

It is incredible to think that less than twenty years after Black's book was published, versions of the solutions she identified (buying through agents and a highly organised ordering and delivery service) were indeed making a positive impact on some working-class family lives, although historians have been slow to acknowledge the fact. John Benson has noted the unhelpful polarity of recent discussions of consumption, between economists interested in marketing and retailing, and ethnographers, anthropologists and sociologists interested in ownership and usage.<sup>6</sup> The publication of The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880-1980, with its chapter on shopping, represents a highly significant beginning to the task of remedying this deficiency. This thesis, and this chapter in particular, represents a continuation of that endeavour.



### *Provisioning*

The contrast drawn by Oakley's respondents in the 1970s between the enjoyment of leisurely non-routine shopping and the sheer slog of its more mundane counterpart, clearly has some resonance across time as was demonstrated by the riposte of the female lead to the male lead in a recent episode of Central Television's situation comedy 'Conjugal Rights': 'No, not groceries. I mean *real* shopping - for the house'.<sup>7</sup> This distinction between 'provisioning' and 'real shopping', which is so clearly signalled in American parlance but not in English, suggests itself as a useful device around which to structure this chapter. A consideration of the processes involved in the former will therefore introduce and inform the later discussion.

The improvement in standards of living which accompanied the inter-war years was less a result of the improvement in wages, than of the fall in the cost of living by almost a third, which especially affected the price of food. This meant that whilst the quantity and quality of food eaten tended to improve, expenditure on it constituted a decreasing proportion of the weekly budget. By 1938 food consumption per head in Britain was about one twelfth higher than in 1929, and there were marked increases in the consumption of the newly recognised 'protective' foods; fruit, vegetables, dairy produce and meat, helped along by 'Drink More Milk' and 'Eat More Fruit' campaigns.<sup>8</sup> Between 1909/13 and 1934 the following increases in annual consumption of food per head were recorded: fruit up 88 per cent; vegetables, 64 per cent; butter and margarine, 50 per cent; eggs, 46 per cent.<sup>9</sup> But these improvements were unevenly spread through the social classes. In 1938 a middle class individual still consumed two to three times more meat, bacon and fish, and three to four times more fruit than a working-class individual.<sup>10</sup> In addition, an expanding range of canned and convenience foods and confectionery was becoming affordable

to an ever greater proportion of the population.

Working-class diets were, however, slow to absorb many new items and the following excerpt from Mrs Ru's interview was typical in revealing how predictable many meals were:

Of course those days there was no such thing as morning coffee, or late dinner. It was plain dinner, lunchtime, and we had ordinary plain teas. Bread and butter, marmalade, jam, scone or a rock cake ... Always had a roast dinner on Sunday, and Saturday we always had a hot supper. Sausages and tomatoes was our Saturday 'high tea', that was, you know, done every week we had that.<sup>11</sup>

Provisioning trips were characterised by a high degree of routine and ritual, in the same way as the meals they were intended to facilitate. They happened on regular days and followed familiar routes. Bud Paul describes the unvarying path taken through Coventry town centre by his mother and her sister on Saturdays, with he and his brother and cousin in tow: "Together we would make a circuit of the shops, including stalls in the market hall, ... down the Drinkwater Arcade, across Smithford Street into the City Arcade and beyond to the Barracks Square".<sup>12</sup> By 1938 Bud and his best friend had themselves established a favoured route for Saturdays, taking in places of greater interest to fourteen year old boys: the cycle showrooms, the cinema, the amusement arcade, Owen Owen department store, the Market Hall, the milk bar, and then either of Woolworth's, Marks and Spencer, British Home Stores or the City Arcade.<sup>13</sup> Another version of this formulaic approach to food shopping is provided by Margaret Forster who describes her own mother's habits in 1940s Carlisle: "As in every aspect of our lives shopping in the market was carefully structured, the route between the stall never varying - butchers, greengrocers, butter women".<sup>14</sup>

The act of purchase was itself attended by further ritualised exchanges. Mrs Y remembers the way her mother's custom was courted by the butcher who would solicitously ascertain her requirements, cut the meat and then offer it for her inspection, asking her by name whether it met with her approval.<sup>15</sup> Such attention to detail ensured that food shopping could not be hurried. Nor was this the only factor to slow proceedings down. Margaret Forster again:

Plenty of time, while goods were selected, talked over, paid for ... Such patience we had, fully expecting each transaction to take the ages it did. ... These assistants had white hats on and were very quick which made the waiting hard to understand. It was the paying which took the time, the system of putting money in cans which whizzed overhead to the central cash desk and then back again with the change wrapped in the bill.<sup>16</sup>

The vivid picture provided by Maud Pember Reeve's respondents of innumerable visits to local shops for tiny quantities of foodstuffs in the earlier part of the century had changed beyond recognition for this group of shoppers<sup>17</sup>. A daily trip was no longer necessary because of poor or non-existent storage facilities, or the sheer impossibility of keeping more than one meal's food out of hungry mouths. Yet the habit often persisted, particularly in connection with a young family. As Judy Attfield has confirmed for the 1950s, and Ann Oakley for the 1960s, pushing a pram to the shops was a way of getting out of the house, breaking up the day, giving self and baby a breath of fresh air, at the same time as carrying out the needful chore of buying in the ingredients of the day's meals.<sup>18</sup>

It was possible to make an 'event' out of this trip between home and shop because of the tendency for shopping facilities to be further away on the new estates where both housing density and retail provision were much less than in older urban districts. Another feature of shopping patterns

to change under the impact of environmental factors, then, was the distance shoppers needed to travel. In this setting it was unlikely that women could continue to experience the same sense of 'confinement' recorded by Robert Roberts for Salford women in the earlier part of the century, including one woman who 'spoke wearily of never having been more than five minutes' walk from her home in eighteen years of married life'.<sup>19</sup>

However, the greater distances involved in shopping also meant that the role played by the local shop was also subject to change. Many accounts of working-class experience highlight the centrality of the local shop(s) to the mediation of a sense of neighbourhood and local identity. As Robert Roberts, Willmott and Young, and others record, it was here that characters were assessed, credit worthiness evaluated, news disseminated and gossip exchanged. The shop was one of the primary institutions through which community relations and standards of behaviour and respectability were monitored and regulated. The sheer newness of the Coventry suburbs in the 1930s and the recent arrival of many of their occupants (to the city, not just the area), militated against the development of an equivalent 'service'. Whilst the suburban housewife may have felt less confined, she may also have missed the quality of social contact available in more traditional working-class settings. As Willmott and Young recorded, the pubs and shops of Bethnal Green provided 'small face-to-face groups with continual opportunities to meet', whereas in Greenleigh 'people are gathered from the corners of the estate, instead of being neighbours with whom they already have a point of contact'.<sup>20</sup>

Although the ratio of shops to people on Coventry's inter-war estates was not as poor as in 1950s Greenleigh, the incoming shopkeeper could not hope to know the names and circumstances of his/her clientele in the same way that his earlier counterparts could.<sup>21</sup> Although solvency could probably be assumed to a greater extent in the suburbs, the

personalisation of the retailer-customer exchange must have been reduced, and the type of conversation described above must have taken place less frequently. However, a greater degree of politeness and deference was likely to have been employed as a compensatory measure.

During the 1930s food retailers' scope to compete on price terms alone was severely curtailed by the impact of the big new price-fixing food combines, and instead they increasingly differentiated themselves through the appearance of their shops and the services they offered, including deliveries and, in middle-class areas, telephone ordering.<sup>22</sup> It has already been noted (in Chapter Two and above) that the proportion of shops on the inter-war estates in Coventry was significantly less than in older areas of the city; so with housewives obliged to travel further for food requirements, the way was clearly open for enterprising retailers to ameliorate the situation by offering to deliver.

An item on the agenda before a Coventry Co-operative Society sub-committee of 22 June 1934 indicates that the Co-op were certainly keen to provide this service. They decided to refer to the Grocery manager 'the question of a number of vans delivering in the same street and canvassers from different branches calling upon the same member'.<sup>23</sup> A Co-operative store manager to whom I spoke recalled the keen competition to drum up business in the new suburban districts stretching beyond his shop.<sup>24</sup> Mrs Ru recalled how 'the Co-op used to call in Bassett Road. ... The man used to come round for the order. I had an order book. I used to write it out in my book, and then he'd deliver it next day. Then I'd go to the shop to pay for it'.<sup>25</sup> Mrs L who lived on the opposite side of the city also stated that the Co-op came round and took orders for groceries and delivered them.<sup>26</sup>

A majority of the women I spoke to recalled having food items delivered at some time during this period, and even when this service

was <sup>not</sup> available, a range of tradesmen visited residential areas to sell foodstuffs and other household items including grocers, bakers, milkmen and coalmen. Far from declining, the numbers of horses and carts in the suburbs may have increased to fill the gap in services caused by the speed of development. The image of the grocery cart pulled by a motorbike (adjacent) seems to me to be a peculiarly Coventry one. A great deal of other business could also be transacted on the doorstep: rent and insurance collectors, clothing club and radio hire agents, salesmen of vacuum cleaners and silk scarves were all mentioned; so much so, that we have to question the extent to which women were obliged to leave their homes and expose themselves to the lure of new products at all.

In fact, in Coventry in the 1930s food shopping almost appears as an adjunct to other activities rather than the other way around. Clearly there was no necessity to go all the way into town to buy basic requirements, yet many women habitually made this trip on at least one day a week, often combining it with a more specific social function. Mrs Ru and her friend shopped and took tea together on a weekly basis. Mrs N described how:

She used to walk into town when I was first married ... I used to walk from Whitley and meet my Mum there and then I used to take her round to the new Woolworths that had the most fantastic restaurant, and I'd buy her a drink of Horlicks and a big wedge of chocolate sponge cake.

Mrs. B and her Mother shopped in town together, sometimes treating themselves to a cup of tea or coffee and a toasted tea cake at Lyons. Mrs W met her sister in town to shop and take in tea, also at Lyons.<sup>27</sup> Allan Jackson describes this establishment as one which provided 'the impecunious suburban with a fine illusion of luxury at remarkably low prices'.<sup>28</sup> Bud Paul reported that Saturday shopping jaunts with his Mother

and Aunt were invariably halted half a dozen times by conversations with old school or work friends they ran into.<sup>29</sup> In a city experiencing the rapid growth and expansion that Coventry was at this time, relocation and removal were a more predictable feature of life than the settled, enduring neighbourhood groups described by other commentators. Under these circumstances, the town centre constituted a valuable site for the maintenance of both social and familial contacts.

The tradespeople quoted in Chapter Two as saying that business on the new estates was 'good on the average, but [with] a tendency at weekends for residents to take a trip into the centre of the city' were clearly feeling the impact of changing shopping patterns that were no longer defined solely by loyalty and locality.<sup>30</sup> Information from respondents suggests that shopping activity was varied and that trips to the 'top of the town' may not have been confined to the weekend. Certainly Mrs Paul made a trip into town on Saturday, and her son recalls the weekly reckoning when cash was counted and put into separate packets for coal, milk checks, clubs etc. as a Saturday night event. And Mr and Mrs W regularly spent their Saturday evenings in the central market. But Mrs R refers to buying material remnants in the market on a Friday and having them made up and ready to wear for the weekend; and leisurely visits to town in the company of friends and relations would have been better enjoyed in the quieter part of the week preceding pay day. By the early part of 1938 a group within the Retail Section of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce was promoting the idea of moving the weekly industrial pay day back from Friday to Thursday, and early closing day for shops from Thursday to Wednesday, with the aim of reducing the concentrated pressure of a post pay day shopping onslaught on Fridays and Saturdays.<sup>31</sup> Friday and Saturday were also the market days in the city.

The opportunity for a more extended shopping expedition would to

some extent be determined by other features of the household routine. Mrs L drew a comparison between the autonomy of the rural housewife (her mother's experience) and the constraints imposed by urban living (her own).<sup>32</sup> In town, she said, it became important to be seen to be doing the laundry on Monday. Anything less had connotations of slatternliness. Monday's meals were conventionally composed of leftovers from Sunday's joint, freeing the housewife of the need to shop and do more than heat something up on the first day of the week. Tuesdays were often dominated by ironing and Thursday was half closing day in Coventry. Throughout the week other members of the family might require a midday meal, including many husbands. On Friday it was sometimes possible to do a bigger than usual shop to tide the family over the weekend and free the housewife of that particular chore, but that was dependent on two factors. Firstly there needed to be money available in advance of the arrival of Friday night's pay packet, and secondly, there could be no reliance on Saturday night's knock-down prices in the market.

Whatever the wishes of the Chamber of Commerce, Saturday was, by custom and practice, *the day for shopping*. On this day money was to hand, routine could be relaxed, child-care and husband-care were easier to facilitate (they could look after one another), and there was time to go further and do more. Accounts from the inter-war period make it absolutely clear that availability of time determined where shopping was done, and the location had an impact on the kind of purchases that were made. Leonora Eyles, describing life for 'Mrs Britain' in 1922 wrote that:

If she is wise she shops at the big stores in the big streets,  
but that takes time, and means running out with several  
children whatever the weather and however tired or busy she  
may be. It also means paying cash. So she visits the big  
stores on Saturday and gets fresh goods, because the stores



do a fast trade and constantly sell out. The rest of the week she patronizes the little corner shop in her street - and the little corner shop is one of the curses of the day.<sup>33</sup>

In an article entitled 'Work to a programme' in Woman's Own for 28 October 1933 (part of a series on running your home), she addresses a rather different group of women; but the advice remains 'to leave only the scullery and back yard to be done on Saturday when you will have shopping and, I hope, a visit to the cinema and an outing with your husband to take up your time'.<sup>34</sup> In his report on Becontree and Dagenham, Terence Young reflected that

In an ordinary working-class district in London, there are at least three types of facilities available for shopping.

Firstly, there are the little family shops, often alone or else in very small groups, which are used when there is little time to spare or when things have been forgotten.

Then there are the rows of larger shops in subsidiary shopping centres, used when there is an hour to spare in the morning or afternoon, for the purchase of food mainly.

Finally there are the masses of large shops and departmental stores in main roads ... They are used when the housewife has an afternoon to spare for looking in shop windows.

Provisions for the weekend, clothing, etc, are usually obtained there.<sup>35</sup>

His account underlines the fact that time was a requisite for more ambitious forms of shopping, as well as money.

Rowntree's leisure tables (Appendix One) show that husbands commonly met up with wives in town on Saturday, and the presence of the wage-earner would appear to complement the availability of time and money, in a formation which maximised the potential to make larger purchases.

### *Sex, lies and shopping lists*

Notwithstanding Rowntree's evidence, another aspect of urban lore stated that husbands did not shop. Acts of purchasing could not easily be separated out from the processes of budgeting that were conventionally ascribed to women in working-class homes. An experience described to me by Mrs Ro is highly suggestive of the kinds of pressure that could be brought to bear to maintain these community sanctioned standards of behaviour.

Her husband, a recent migrant from Wales, took the unusual step of handing over his entire pay packet on the first two weeks of their married life, *and* accompanying her to the shops to spend it; which she duly did. 'I spent the lot. I didn't give him any! I never give it a thought!' When this happened again on the second occasion, his response was: "'No that's not on" ... "I'll give you so much". He never went again!"<sup>36</sup> His presence on the trip was evidently dependant upon her respecting an obligation to tip up some pocket money for him. The fact that he forebore to say anything about her omission the first time indicates a level of respect for her control over this sphere of decision-making. Nevertheless, when she failed to realise her mistake, he not only imposed a different financial arrangement, but withdrew from the spending process altogether.

Why was it necessary to wrest control back from her in such a determined way? Weddings and wives were common sources of factory and shopfloor humour. Mr X described how workmates about to be married were treated: 'Some caustic bloody notices they put on [the lathes] about getting married, you know ... It was a regular gag'. In the regular round of practical jokes, the lunchbox provided both a focus and a channel for humour with a domestic focus. A note would be left in the lid saying 'Do you know where your Jim goes when he works overtime? Ask him if he knows Jean', or 'Do you know your George doesn't like cheese?'<sup>37</sup> Under

these circumstances it seems reasonable to surmise that a workmate only recently wed, and conspicuously without loose change or tobacco (often viewed as part of his daily rations), would be subject to the jibes if not the derision of his colleagues. Hence Mr Ro's tactical withdrawal.

Shopping was 'women's work', and it involved not only the walk to the retailer, but the complicated negotiation of competing needs that preceded the walk, and the market research involved in 'just looking' once the walk began. Many accounts of working-class marriages have commented on the adoption of a policy of secrecy over money matters by women seeking to achieve for themselves a sphere of influence and autonomy within the marriage. There was no possibility of sharing worries or talking problems through in this situation. Making ends meet or successfully disguising the fact that they were <sup>not</sup> was frequently essential for the preservation of self-esteem and the respect of one's partner.

It was with this aim in mind that Mrs L did her best to shield women customers from over exposure to credit, whilst working as a collector for the credit agency of the Coventry Co-operative Society. She took the view that, 'There'll always be those people who can't manage money and there'll always be those people who're extravagant in the wrong direction', but she did her best to mediate the situation by advising clients, 'You can't afford to have that, because you haven't got the money to pay, so you musn't have it. You'll have to wait until you've finished that'.<sup>20</sup> And by being careful to call when husbands were out she forged an alliance between herself and her women customers dedicated to maintaining the necessary illusion of women's innate ability as money managers.

Although there were instances of information being withheld from husbands (at least initially), such as Mrs L waiting for the right moment before telling Mr L she had taken a part-time job and Mrs Ru using up her savings before admitting that the housekeeping would no longer stretch;

such reticence runs counter to the broader picture given me by respondents. In many accounts, openness, honesty and a sense of shared purpose were the qualities being emphasised. The clearest expression of this came from the Zs<sup>39</sup>. Mrs Z:

Well, I think, by and large, all our lives we've been pretty even like that, we've never had two purses; we've always, you know, what belongs to one belongs to the other. We've never been selfish, what's mine is mine, and that. We've always shared in those things like that.

Mr Z:

As we started [Mrs Z] used to get a housekeeping allowance, and I paid the rent and the bills, like gas, electricity and rates, and then if we'd got any left and we wanted anything, we used to just pool it in and buy what we wanted, if we'd got enough money.

Mrs Ru described how she and Mr Ru reached their decision to buy a house: 'Well we talked it over, we thought it would be a good proposition'.<sup>40</sup> Asked whether he talked to his wife about the possibility of changing jobs, Mr X replied 'Yes, you know, how things were going'.<sup>41</sup> Sometimes the degree of transparency was expressed in the way money was accessed. Mrs N described how their money, '... was all just all together. And we used to keep it in the top drawer of the dressing table, right hand side, and I would have so much out for housekeeping and then [Mr N] would say, "Well you know where it is if you want any more"'.<sup>42</sup>

Joanna Bourke has noted how economists discussing improving living standards for working-class households at the end of the nineteenth century in terms of heightened consumption, failed to acknowledge that 'consumption needs cannot be met without labour'. She points out that 'rising wages led to an increased demand for female labour within the home'.<sup>43</sup> In a similar vein, Mary Grieve, the first editor of Woman

magazine launched at its working-class audience in 1937, commented that: 'Prosperity has its worries, not as sharp as poverty, but nagging just the same'<sup>44</sup>. If shopping was *conventionally* women's work, then this demarcation appears to have become much less of a priority, once additional income opened up a degree of choice. Poverty bred tension in marriages, combined with a sense of powerlessness which made strictly defined roles and secrecy a psychological necessity for both partners. Relative prosperity appears to have created a space in which much more reliance could be placed on a partner's involvement in making choices. So whilst few of these husbands would have expected to be consulted on the week's groceries, their wives increasingly consulted them and expected their active participation in the making of more significant choices.

So when Mrs L told me that her husband *never* shopped with her and 'had no [financial] responsibility at all. He gave me all the money and I had to do everything with it. He gave me an opportunity to do what I wanted. He never ~~inter~~fered at all. That was a woman's job'.<sup>45</sup> she was reconfirming her support for conventionally designated roles within marriage rather than describing the literal truth. She mentioned only moments later that he, 'had a car in the Thirties I'm sure of it. Yes, an old Humber Vogue. He would buy that. [I] can't figure out how he bought that car ... I had nothing to do with it'.

There is clear evidence that men shopped, although Mr and Mrs W's weekly trip together to the market on Saturday night is a comparatively rare example in this group of male involvement with regular household provisioning. Mrs Y's comments about the occasion when her father brought home a vast quantity of speckled apples, proved to be more insightful. She felt that her mother was responsible for buying basic items, but father involved himself in 'exceptional' expenditure.<sup>46</sup> 'Exceptional' expenditure and men's involvement with it will be further discussed in the

next section.

No one over-riding pattern of food shopping activity emerged for this group of respondents, even within this ten year period. Habits undoubtedly changed in response to a variety of factors: the arrival of children; the position of home in relation to shops, family etc; the availability and quality of local services, such as delivery. Deliveries and other doorstep services did significantly ease the burden of shopping for day to day requirements for a majority of these women at some point during the period, and this constituted one common feature. Another was the increasingly prevalent trip into town, although this was not necessarily primarily associated with food shopping, and there was no unanimity as to the day.

These women seem clearly to have been experiencing less pressure on their time, enabling shopping to be reconfigured as less of a chore and more of a leisure activity, at least on occasions. Time spent on provisioning should <sup>not</sup> be considered in isolation from the related issues of improved housing, which brought with it a reduction in time spent on other housework, and increased reliance on family planning which produced smaller families. Most of these women were childless during the first few years of marriage and then had several years gap between subsequent children. Freed from these constraints, many women found other reasons besides shopping for leaving the house. For example Mrs Ru:

I had all day to kill, and living in two rooms I hadn't much to do.

I used to spend three days a week, I used to go in the afternoon to the cinema ... And the people I lived with had got two little children ... and often I used to walk into town, push them into town in their pram, and the mother used to catch the bus and meet me there. I used to do the walking, give her a rest ... I didn't seem to do a lot of shopping.<sup>47</sup>

*'Real shopping' and 'exceptional expenditure'*

Men's and women's different relationships to household goods were set in place well before marriage. Quite apart from the gender specific ways in which many boys and girls were socialised to carry out different kinds of domestic task, all young women were encouraged to collect items for their 'bottom drawer'; a concept for which no male equivalent existed. Well before marriage, and often well before courtship, girls began to set aside many of the kinds of artefacts that would be necessary to establish a first home. Mrs Ro haunted the market long before she met the future Mr Ro or 'even thought of getting married', and:

used to buy one or two odds and ends, stick them in [a big black box] and that was it. I had a lovely lot of things I did ... tablecloths, sheets, towels, pillowcases and all them. And china and all the rest of it, cups and saucers and teasetts and things.<sup>48</sup>

In the same way Mrs Ru:

bought all my pillowcases and sheets, you know all linen, table-linen, and I paid into m' club. Used to pay a shilling a week I think it was, and I bought all my pots and pans, brooms and everything, boot brushes, everything like that through the club.<sup>49</sup>

Mrs W collected 'little bits of crocks; two big peg rugs I made; and oh all sorts of bits in a big box I had'.<sup>50</sup> A range of acquisitional tactics were therefore being employed to furnish bottom drawers, including savings clubs, strategic use of the market, and personal industry.

Some attempt was usually made to save once courtship was underway and marriage was being seriously contemplated. But the attainment of a pre-arranged financial target was rarely the precipitating factor for the wedding itself. In a high proportion of cases it was prompted instead by a discontinuity in accommodation arrangements. This period gave both partners an opportunity to assess their future spouse's money management

abilities. Despite higher earnings, men did <sup>not</sup> always prove to be better savers. Mrs G saved forty pounds compared to the shilling her policeman fiancé had left after the necessary purchase of a bicycle and a lengthy period of convalescence. She ended up buying his wedding suit.<sup>51</sup> Mrs W related that: 'We saved once and we argued and I gave him his money back. He bought himself a new overcoat'. This was excused because family circumstances made it difficult for Mr W to save, whereas Mrs W lived-in as a domestic servant 'all found', a situation which made it comparatively easy.<sup>52</sup> Problems in this area seem not to have dissuaded anyone from marrying. A high degree of pragmatism was evident. Mrs Ru, for example described how:

His mother kept saying "When you two going to get married?" And I used to think "Silly old fool, we haven't got any money". And [Mr Ru] hadn't a father you see, and really he hadn't got much of a job. So there was no prospects of getting married.<sup>53</sup>

Nevertheless, after four years of courting they did get married although Mr Ru's prospects were no better than before, working in a cycle shop in Southend.

Material aspirations seem not to have played a part in shaping domestic ambitions. Asked what hopes and dreams she had for future married life, Mrs W replied, 'No I didn't dream of anything. I just took things as it came. We didn't do them sort of things because those days you couldn't do that. We just got married and that was it'.<sup>54</sup> Mrs Ro actually distrusted the gift-giving indulged in by her brother-in-law, as it went hand in hand with lapses in behaviour: 'He was ... [a] ladies man. He was horrible. He was really. He didn't talk to her properly. Not at all - and then he used to buy her a present, which wasn't any good. That's not the way to go on'.<sup>55</sup> She made an implicit comparison with the honest poverty on offer in her own marriage.



In at least two instances, however, men clearly exhibited anxieties about the level of comfort they could offer their future brides. Mr N had to assume responsibility for the whole of the eight shillings a week they had committed themselves to saving with a 'Permanent Money Society', because Mrs N's Mother could <sup>not</sup> cope financially without the whole of her daughter's earnings. They existed for a year on two shillings pocket money a week between them, and he worked weekends for a month to earn the three pounds to buy an engagement ring. Mrs N cheerfully agreed to marry in a 'little suit' and without bridesmaids; but when, shortly afterwards, a friend allowed her to try on her own white lace wedding dress, Mr N said 'that he would regret that till the end of his life, what he'd denied me'.

After four years of courting including an extended period of unemployment, Mr B said to his intended:

"Look it's about time I told you what money I've got". And she said, "Well you needn't tell me if you don't want to". And I said, "Well I DO want to. I've got three hundred pounds that I've saved myself and I should like to get another hundred saved before we get married".

Further delay was <sup>not</sup> strictly necessary because Mr B discovered that in one important sense at least he had found himself a perfect soul-mate: someone who had had the savings lesson as strongly inculcated as he had. To his astonishment he discovered that, mostly out of wages from shop work, the future Mrs B had herself contrived to save an incredible one hundred pounds.<sup>56</sup>

### *Equipping the home*

When I showed Mr and Mrs B a photograph of a particular street in central Coventry, Mrs B turned to her husband and asked if he remembered what

they had bought there. It was their first kitchen table and he did remember, as she clearly expected he would, although only she could quote the price. All the couples I <sup>have</sup> spoken to chose the furniture for their first home together, were surprised at the idea that it would be otherwise, and obviously attached importance to this act of togetherness. Nevertheless, their roles once inside the shop were sharply distinguished. Mrs N described this most vividly: 'Mr N just stood there and looked pleasant and opened the cheque book' (she was speaking metaphorically about the cheque book). Mrs J's statement also starkly betrays the ambivalence of this 'togetherness': 'We decided everything together. If I was happy he was'. The reasons for the men's relative passivity in the salesrooms were variously expressed. Mr G clearly felt constrained in expressing an opinion because of the different relationship he perceived he had to the domestic space: 'If I really didn't like it I would say so. But I suppose a woman spends more time in the house than a man does normally ... and they should have the choice.' Mrs N put it as follows: 'Well we would be together, but Mr N always left the choice to me. He hasn't got any ideas about colours. He used to say "I'll leave it to you. It'll look nice. I don't know what you want"'. However reticent or inarticulate the men were, their presence was valued by their wives who wouldn't have dreamed of making these purchases independently.<sup>57</sup>

The imbalance in their contributions to the decision-making process was clearly organised around gender. The men might equally well have argued that their wives knew better about the qualities of different materials and their maintenance requirements, or about what could be afforded out of the weekly budget, as all these areas of expertise were traditionally assigned to women. A lack of confidence about aesthetic judgements based on colour can almost certainly be traced back to messages received from peers and others at school and afterwards. In this context,

**Hello! Readers  
HERE IS YOUR  
FREE GIFT**

To introduce our Goods we are presenting our Free Gift to every purchaser of Goods valued **£20**.

Other Free Gifts in proportion for smaller or larger purchases.

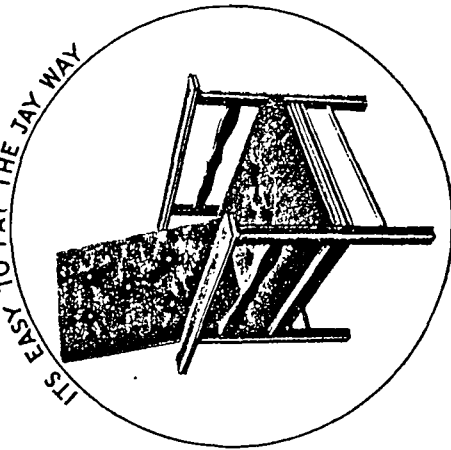
*Bring this advertisement and claim your free gift*

Value	for	Monthly
£10	..	8 -
£20	..	12 -
£30	..	16 -
£30	..	20 -

*These are only a suggestion.*

PHONE 3737

IT'S EASY TO PAY THE JAY WAY



**SAFETY FIRST  
DON'T JAY WALK—BUT WALK INTO**

**JAYS**  
THE FIRM FOR SECURITY

**We invite you to  
INSPECT OUR  
FREE GIFT**

Coventry engineers are known the world over for the quality of their workmanship. The same applies to our furniture, like your machines, it is made for service.

**Quality is our consideration**  
Our Prices and Terms are second to none. Visit our showrooms and judge yourself

Post this Coupon for Catalogue :  
Name .....  
Address .....  
Ad. stamp only required

**JAYS, 4 FLEET STREET, COVENTRY**

'Coventry engineers are known the world over for the quality of their workmanship. The same applies to our furniture'. Jays' advertisement which appeared in the Alfred Herbert 'News' in early 1930.

it is worth quoting in full the view expressed by Josephine Klein in a note in Samples from English Cultures.

In my opinion, a whole set of desirable values have been brought into disrepute because those who hold and seek to inculcate them are, rightly or wrongly, associated with the outsider's contempt for the less privileged. It is especially unfortunate that the mass-media give facilities to those who wish to make capital out of this. The particular values under fire at any time can easily be identified by, for instance, listening to radio comedians, or by reading the editorials and "features" in the popular press. Fairness, ("playing the game"), tenderness or *aesthetic appreciation in men*, intelligence in women, the intellectual or cultural interests of minority groups, seem to be among the more permanent of these targets.<sup>58</sup> (my italics)

Klein was writing about the occupants of 'Branch Street' in London, as observed between 1944 and 1949.

An exception to the general rule of male exclusion, and self-exclusion, from the feminine domain of house furnishing selection was the appeal made by Jay's furniture company to the male employees of Alfred Herbert Ltd. in Coventry in the March 1930 edition of the works' paper.<sup>59</sup> Part of the text of their advertisement (illustrated) went as follows: 'Coventry engineers are known the world over for the quality of their workmanship. The same applies to our furniture, like your machines, it is made for service'. This blatant appeal to the male ego may well have swayed some potential customers into this, rather than another outlet, but it is my guess that once inside the gender imbalance already described would have prevailed. The sales staff in Jay's may have used this motif to engage the men more fully in the negotiation of a purchase, but this suggests a more concerted and self-conscious sales campaign than is

indicated by the advertisement in which the appeal to engineers is the last in a series of 'hooks' designed to attract attention. The others were the not inconsiderable free gift of a chair, and the availability of credit terms. Nor was the text retained in future insertions.

Various reasons were given for choosing a particular shop in which to buy furniture. Mrs W thought that they chose theirs because: 'It was a big shop, and they were sort of ordinary people ... They were reasonable and the hire purchase was good'; but they were the only ones to cite the availability of credit as a determining factor. Attitudes towards credit are discussed below. In contrast Mrs N described how they shopped in Anslow's 'because that was high class, and my Father always said, "Aim high. Stoop and you pick up nothing"'. Anslow's was particularly mentioned by two couples, and Sem-Par by another. Both shops promoted themselves as purveyors of quality goods in advertisements, and were in any case clearly visually distinguishable from lower class retailers in terms of shop frontage and displays. In general the attitude towards major purchases was best expressed by the Gs in connection with their engagement ring: 'You didn't buy the ring, you bought the price'. This signified the desire of all couples to buy the very best quality they could afford, with this consideration far outweighing simple appearance.

There was a definite correlation between relative wealth and degree of emotional investment in purchases for the home. The Ro's for instance were probably in the worst financial position and Mrs Ro recounted their experience as follows:

We just had to go steady, 'cause I mean his wages wasn't that much, and we had to go bit by bit ... I don't know where I had [the furniture] from. I can't remember that. Just took 'em and that was it ... I mean they're things that you don't sort of bother with aren't they? You know, I mean you've got other

things to think of.<sup>60</sup>

The role of sales staff did not appear to be decisive in the making of purchasing decisions. The Bs and Ns expressed very similar opinions about their behaviour, indicating that attention from staff was experienced as helpful and pleasurable, rather than coercive.

Well they bent over backwards. Because I mean it was hard to make a living and they were all anxious to get your custom so they were nice ... They were like that with everyone because they were desperate for the custom.

I think they were always attentive but in a deferential sort of way when we bought things. They were glad to make a sale in those days.<sup>61</sup>

In general the views expressed about credit were vehemently negative, as in Mrs Ru's case: 'My father didn't believe in it. [He] always said, "If you can't afford to pay it, you can't have it"'. This attitude evidently concurred with her husband's as he in his turn instilled in their daughter that 'Those who borrow never mean to pay back, and those who mean to pay back never borrow'. The Ru's purchasing agenda was therefore determined by the availability of savings: 'We never had anything on the never-never. With us, we used to save up and when we got the money we used to go out and get what we wanted'. This is the same policy as described earlier by the Ys and was also adopted by the Ns, even at the expense of Mrs N staying at work for some time after their marriage, in order to avoid the inevitable debts incurred in setting up a first home. The only thing the Bs ever bought on hire purchase was a gas stove, and this almost certainly had more to do with the Gas Showrooms *modus operandi* than personal preference. Although Mr X expressed the pragmatic view that 'you'd be committed with hire purchase to a certain extent, but nothing like they do today. But there was certain things you must have that you

couldn't find the money for'; the overwhelming view was anti-credit. Even the struggling Mrs Ro would 'save [the money] you see. I used to put it away. Nobody knew where it was'. The important thing was to 'know that you don't owe them anything'.<sup>62</sup>

Two families bought their furniture through a catalogue, but here again these cannot be viewed as straightforward credit transactions because they both utilised the commission they accrued as agents for the catalogue among a group of neighbours and workmates. The furniture was therefore in one sense free; or in another, given to them by the catalogue companies in payment for the time they invested as agents. In both instances the husbands acted as agents. The Ws ran the club jointly, with Mrs W liaising with neighbours who were customers, and Mr W doing all the administration and liaising with a large group of customers in his workplace (British Thomson Houston). Mr F discontinued his catalogue activity after coming to Coventry, and in view of the evident importance of workmates as a customer base, his unsettled pattern of employment seems likely to be the causal factor.<sup>63</sup> Catalogue shopping was steadily becoming established and had sufficient *afficionados* to be giving the national Chambers of Commerce serious cause for concern. Trading in factories was a recurrent topic of discussion as recorded by the journal of the local Chamber.<sup>64</sup>

***Fashion victims, gadget fiends, and hoarders: He who shopped***

An item in the parish magazine of St. John the Baptist Church, Coventry, raises the possibility that the problem with men may have been, not that they did <sup>not</sup> shop, nor that they shopped incompetently, but that in some respects they did <sup>not</sup> discard frequently enough. The image of the 'male animal' as a hopeless hoarder was used to encourage the donation of goods to a rummage sale:

[Spring cleaning] arrives as surely as the swallows and is as welcome as the East Wind ... Boots and suits and furniture are gathered up by the cyclone that sweeps through the house. But that is not enough. Presently the male animal will return from office or works ... and will with the nose of a retriever recover from the dust-bin, the attic or the garden his beloved property; the cracked boots, the patched trousers, the chair with the sagging seat. And all will be undone - unless the goods are sent to the Church House ... or a postcard will ensure their collection before the Rummage Sale.<sup>65</sup>

And although at least one man, Mr Y, described a dislike of the fuss involved in the buying of new clothes which often goes alongside a fondness for hanging on to old ones, there was also evidence of man as fashion victim. Mr N. wore a dark green made-to-measure suit and green suede shoes to be married in 'because that was the fashion'. When Mrs N first met him, he and his friends were wearing 'really good navy blue Melton cloth overcoats and a white silk scarf with the tassels on, you know like the men wear that go to the opera', as that was the trend at the time.<sup>66</sup>

Other images of male shoppers appeared in local publications. In one of a series of articles on photographic equipment in the Alfred Herbert 'News', the 'Gadget Fiend' was an identifiable type to whom the manufacturers of some camera accessories were said to pander.<sup>67</sup> Indeed in the following edition the death of one such gadget fiend was reported. Mr H.S. March, an associate of the company, was recalled in the following terms:

He was an expert in wireless; one of the rooms in his house was equipped with a number of sets which he would dismantle and rebuild at frequent intervals so as to keep pace with the rapid



developments which take place in the design of wireless apparatus.<sup>68</sup>

The appearance of the gadget fiend in the Alfred Herbert 'News' seems to me to be no coincidence. The company was at this time the largest and most respected machine tool maker in the world, and the toolmakers were at the heart of the male fraternity of skilled engineers in the city. Paul Thompson has described how skill, and pride in skill, has historically been central to the tradition and self-image of the city, and especially its male citizens.<sup>69</sup> The determinedly autonomous ribbon weavers passed it onto the watchmakers, and skills derived from watchmaking fed in turn into the burgeoning cycle, motorcycle, machine tool and motor vehicle industries from the turn of the century. The inroads made by Taylorism and scientific management made the skilled engineers' stance decreasingly viable but it still had considerable potency in the 1930s, and car-making as a luxury craft trade of skilled engineers and coachbuilders was still represented in the city at that time by Daimler. Incomers were quickly informed that skills learned in the heavier industries of the North were no match for the fine work required locally.<sup>70</sup> A local man writing of the time said:

Ah, there we did feel superior. Coventry's engineers made luxurious Daimlers, the snazzy Alvis and Riley cars, the Triumph Gloria and Hillman Minx among others. Our men were proud of their [inherited] skills and of their motor car factories. The definite article was prefixed to the name of their company so that 'Alf' was panel-beating at the Morris, Tom worm-turning at the Humber, and 'Dick' had left the Daimler to go to the Maudslay.<sup>71</sup>

The men may have been proud of their factories, but there was nevertheless a definitely 'anti-industrial' component to their conception of skills. One of the requirements of any skilled engineer of the period was a facility

to grapple almost instinctively with technical problems, technical equipment and the language of technology, something that was not required once the line dominated production methods.

Kenneth Richardson's account of the city's industries is helpful in shedding light on the relationship between work-based knowledge and the domestic environment. Of the watchmaking community he noted that, 'The Coventry handmade watch was never intended for the mass market, and its makers were proud of the fact. It gave quality to those who appreciated it'.<sup>72</sup> Of the city's early car building community he wrote as follows:

It is impossible to exaggerate the immense self-confidence with which the young men working in Coventry approached the making of motor-cars in the years before 1914. Some worked on their own account in backyard workshops, others in quality firms such as Daimler, where it was difficult to persuade anyone that cars were being made anywhere else ... Young apprentices worked at Daimler, Siddeley-Deasy or some other factory during the day and argued about cars all evening in the relatively few hotel lounges ... The work of Henry Ford in America they regarded as not worthy of the name of engineering. When someone like Charles Friswell, the sales concessionaire for Standard, talked about volume production of cars which could actually be driven by ordinary, inexpert people, they felt that he did not know what he was talking about. For them, a motor-car was something which should be placed only in the hands of an informed enthusiast.<sup>73</sup>

Flora Thompson also reflected on this diversification of skills in her locality of Candleford. She referred to the experience of the village's blacksmiths who were 'secure in the knowledge of their importance in the existing scheme of things' in the last part of the nineteenth century.

Twenty years later the younger of that generation of smiths were painting above their shop doors, 'Motor Repairs a Speciality', and, greatly daring, taking mechanisms to pieces which they had no idea how they were going to put together again. They made many mistakes, which passed undetected because the owners had no more knowledge than they had of the inside of the 'dratted thing', and they soon learned by experiment sufficient to enable them to put on a wise air of authority. Then the legend over the door was repainted 'Motor Expert', and expert many of them became in a surprisingly short time, for they bought the endless patience and ingenuity of the craftsman to the new mechanism, plus his adaptable skill.<sup>74</sup>

It is worth stressing here, that the 'skill' sometimes existed more in illusion than in reality. A degree of bluff was sometimes necessary to maintain the illusion of knowledgeable appreciation.

The For Sale and Wanted columns of the Alfred Herbert 'News' reveal more about the domain of the gadget fiend. Bikes, motorbikes, cars, cameras, gramophones and radios are the most commonly featured items; but it is their descriptions which attract most attention. Unrestricted by considerations of cost, patrons' inserts are lengthy and reveal a delight in sophisticated technical detail. So for instance we have not merely a radio, but 'Osram Music Magnet 4, with BTH Tungar Charger, GEC eliminator, blue spot 66r unit and major chassis mounted on 3' baffle. Oldham accumulator and steel mast. Will accept £10'.<sup>75</sup> The availability of a free works' magazine carrying free small ads contributed to the growth of knowledgeable interest in this area and a developing culture of technical appreciation among men whose identity as workers was founded on skill and whose daily work experience often depended on their powers of judgement and technical manipulation.

Nor did the purchases suggested by these advertisements signify isolated instances of male consumerist activity. The 'For Sale and Wanted' columns revealed a trend towards the disposal of gramophone players complete with large collections of records which were initially puzzling. I wondered whether they should properly be regarded as incidents of poverty-induced cash generation, but soon realised that they were part of an on-going process of up-grading of technical equipment. Old-fashioned gramophones were being traded in for the latest in wireless, and while rapid advances in radio design were being made throughout the period, the technically discerning continually sought to keep pace with all such developments.

The Ts' own His Masters Voice hand-wound gramophone purchased in 1927 or '28 was superceded by the eight valve Pilot receiver with cathode ray tube for fine tuning, and multi-waveband display panel bought in 1934.<sup>76</sup> The Ps' hand-cranked gramophone similarly made way for a two-valve Portadyne battery-operated wireless<sup>77</sup>. The Ts' friend Mr. B:

started with a large box and dials, and an even larger black horn speaker beside it. Later they graduated to a sophisticated instrument, with its own set of headphones, operating on short wave channels, which could pull in stations from every continent.<sup>78</sup>

All the descriptions I have found of radios are lovingly detailed and all are from men. Men bought them and prioritised their use. Just as much as cars, this was a male area of consumption. Up-grading was going on in other areas too. Mr P went from a bicycle to a Francis Barnett 2-stroke motorbike, to a BSA 250cc side valve model. With his help, his son went from a wooden scooter, to a metal scooter, to a second-hand bike to a new bike.<sup>79</sup> For those who wished, the progression from motorbike to motor car could be relatively painlessly accomplished: second-hand cars could be obtained for as little as twenty-five to forty pounds ie. Rover 9 1926 4-5

seater in black leather and maroon, £35.<sup>80</sup> And repairs and refinements could be surreptitiously carried out with the connivance of works' supervisors.

But this generalised enthusiasm should not be taken to imply uncritical acceptance, or even necessarily confidence in these realms. Mr. T, a tool room worker at Armstrong Siddeley with a side-line in orchestral work and musical tuition, concerned himself that the acquisition of a radio was inimical to more family centred musical entertainment within the home, and also required the ministrations of a conscientious shop owner before committing himself to a purchase. As his son recounted, buying the radio 'demanded special care. First Mr. Cook, the shop owner in Gosford Street, demonstrated everything three times over. Then he promised his personal attention in fitting the outdoor aerial'.<sup>81</sup>

Men were not only involved in isolated purchases, they were the motive force in whole series of acquisitions and they characteristically validated these purchases by reference to the family. In this thing-orientated, domestically focused atmosphere, some skilled men used the workplace or workplace skills to further the cause of home. Mrs Y's father used his coachtrimming abilities to re-upholster their sofa, whilst Mr X and his mates - all turners - made brass candlesticks. Mr W built a trellis in his back garden, Mr N built a wash-house for his wife in their's. These men were more likely to have sets of tools for use at home, many would have made them themselves at work. Mr W paid into a club at work for children's portrait photos, and had customers there for his Universal catalogue agency.<sup>82</sup>

Apart from taking a supporting role in the choice of domestic furnishings, there were instances of men making independent and spontaneous purchases intended to surprise and delight their partners. Mr F bought Mrs F 'a very nice handbag after the first baby was born ... it

was the loveliest handbag I've ever got in my life'. And Mrs Ru described as her 'biggest thrill' when Mr Ru bought her a sideboard to replace the Tate sugar box in which she had previously stored their crockery.<sup>83</sup>

Working-class men should not be assumed to be devoid of aesthetic sensibility as the advertisement for the modestly priced Austin range of cars shows; beauty as a selling feature comes before dependability here. In the workplace engineers based estimations of skill and job stature on the beauty or otherwise of colleague's toolboxes:

The toolbox itself had to be something to be admired, and it had to be a sort of status symbol. Because everybody aspired to have a very very nice veneered tool box ... Say they started a new labour and people came in with their toolboxes, well they'd take one look at the bloke's toolbox and they'd try to adjudicate whether he was good, bad or indifferent by the appearance of his box.<sup>84</sup>

In Salford, Robert Robert's father took great pride in demonstrating the raising and lowering mechanism of the brass chandelier he had constructed; but more than that, the entire display on the over-mantel above the fireplace was 'his' and the print of a notable battle was defined as a 'family heirloom'.<sup>85</sup> Items belonging to Coventrian Bud Paul's father also had first place on the mantelpiece, and on the sideboard of their home in the 1930s. These were his sports trophies, a 'mass of cups, medals, watches, clocks, salad bowls and cutlery'. Paul Junior contrasted the stylish chiming clocks won by his father in the front and living-rooms with the incongruity of the pair of tall cast iron figures of King Robert the Bruce and the Scottish chieftain Wallace at either end of the mantelshelf. There was also a framed Boy Scout's certificate for bravery awarded to Paul Senior on the wall at the foot of the boy's bed.<sup>86</sup> These men were involved in the construction and display of a personal and/or

family history utilising material possessions. The use of the mantelpiece is significant because of its situation above the fireplace, the symbolic centre of the home.

If opportunity seems to be an obstacle to men's consumerism we should remember that shops stayed open until seven at night, later at the weekend, that many men went home for their lunches, and that at this time it was relatively easy to prop a bike up outside a shop and pop in. Many men's routes to and from work took them past major shopping areas.

Where were women in all this? Were they achieving some kind of parity by acquiring any of the new pieces of household equipment designed to lessen their domestic loads? By and large, no. Mrs N's response to my question about irons was revealing: 'Nobody had electric irons then. You had a flat iron and put it on the gas stove', similarly you didn't have a geyser downstairs because water could be heated in a pan on the stove. Mrs T's father sold vacuum cleaners at one time, so I asked if her mother had one. 'Oh no', she replied, 'he wouldn't have seen the point, the place looked pretty clean without one'.<sup>57</sup>

The problem with goods aimed at women was that they only did an existing job better. 'Men's' products on the other hand did entirely new things - recorded important events, transported people about, entertained the family. I was left with the enduring image of Mrs N and her heavy curtains being transported to her mother's home to use *her* sewing machine, on her husband's or his friend's motorbike. This husband had a camera and a cine-camera.<sup>58</sup>

## *Footnotes to Chapter Five*

1. See C. Davidson, A Woman's Work is Never Done: A History of Housework in the British Isles, 1650-1950 (1982); C. Hardyment, From Mangle to Microwave: The Mechanization of Household Work (Cambridge, 1988); E. Lupton, Mechanical Brides: Women and Machines From Home to Office (New York, 1993).
2. A. Oakley, Housewife (Harmondsworth, 1974), p.3, p.131 and p.123.
3. E. Roberts, A Woman's Place (Oxford, 1984); Bourke, Working-Class Cultures in Britain.
4. For a discussion of Frederick's work see D. Hayden, The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Designs for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1982).
5. C. Black, A New Day of Housekeeping (1918), p.47 and p.123.
6. J. Benson, The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, p.59.
7. Broadcast 3 June 1994.
8. Branson and Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, p.240.
9. J. Stevenson, Social Conditions in Britain Between the Wars (Harmondsworth, 1977), p.127.
10. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures, p.6.
11. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
12. B. Paul, Sent from Coventry (Studley, 1987), p.9.
13. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.76-77.
14. M. Forster, Hidden Lives (Harmondsworth, 1995), p.166.
15. Transcript of interview with Mrs Y.
16. Forster, Hidden Lives p.166-67.
17. See Pember Reeves, Round About A Pound A Week.
18. See Oakley, Housewife; and Judy Attfield, 'Inside Pram Town' in J. Attfield and P. Kirkham (eds) A View From the Interior (1989).
19. Roberts, Classic Slum, p.49.



20. M. Young and P. Willmott, Family and Kinship in East London (Harmondsworth, 1962), p.153.
21. Bethnal Green had one shop per 44 people, Greenleigh one shop per 300 people, and Coventry one shop per 200 people (p.97 of 'Coventry Sociological Survey'.
22. See Branson and Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, pp.224-25.
23. Coventry Co-operative Society Minute Book. Book 13, p.7.
24. Transcript of interview with Mr Fe.
25. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
26. Transcript of interview with Mrs L.
27. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs Ru, Mrs W, Mrs B and Mrs N.
28. Jackson, Semi-Detached London, p.180.
29. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.9.
30. Midland Daily Telegraph 24 June 1936.
31. The outcome of this idea is unclear. Coventry Chamber of Commerce, 'Journal', Jan/Feb and May/Jun 1938.
32. Transcript of interview with Mrs L.
33. M.L. Eyles, The Woman in the Little House, p.73.
34. Reproduced as frontispiece in J. Greenfield, 'From "Angels in the House" to "The Craft Workers of Today' (MA Thesis, University of Warwick, 1991).
35. T. Young, Becontree and Dagenham: The Story of the Growth of a Housing Estate (1934), p.103.
36. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ro.
37. Transcript CRO 1647/1/1.
38. Transcript of interview with Mrs L.
39. Transcript CRO 1647/1/5.
40. Transcript of interview Mrs Ru.

41. Transcript CRO 1647/1/1.
42. Transcript of interview with Mrs N.
43. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures, p.65.
44. M. Grieve, Millions Made My Story (1964) p.93.
45. Transcript of interview with Mrs L.
46. Transcript of interview with Mrs Y.
47. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
48. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ro.
49. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
50. Transcript of interview with Mrs W.
51. Transcript of interview with Mr and Mrs G.
52. Transcript of interview with Mrs W.
53. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
54. Transcript of interview with Mrs W.
55. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ro.
56. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs N, and Mr and Mrs B.
57. Transcripts of interviews with Mr and Mrs B, Mr and Mrs G, Mrs N and Mrs J.
58. J. Klein, Samples From English Cultures Vol. I (1965), p.31n.
59. Alfred Herbert 'News', March 1930 p.109.
60. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs W, Mrs N, Mr and Mrs G, and Mrs Ro.
61. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs B and Mrs N.
62. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs Ru, Mrs N, Mrs B, Mrs Ro and 1647/1/1.
63. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs W and Mrs F.
64. See Coventry Chamber of Commerce 'Journal', Sept/Oct 1926, Nov/Dec 1935 and Sept/Oct 1939.
65. Parish magazine of S. John the Baptist Church, April 1929.

66. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs N and Mr Y.
67. Alfred Herbert 'News', March/Apr 1933, p.45.
68. Alfred Herbert 'News', May/Jun 1933, p.50.
69. P. Thompson, 'Playing at being skilled men' in Social History Vol. 13  
(1) pp. 45-69.
70. Transcript CRO 1647/1/1.
71. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.52.
72. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.14.
73. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.44.
74. Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, p.372.
75. Alfred Herbert 'News', March/April 1933.
76. B. Taylor, Seide Maises: Grandfather's Tales (1994), p.31 and pp.62-63.
77. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.31.
78. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.30.
79. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.11, p.39.
80. Alfred Herbert 'News', May 1931.
81. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.31.
82. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs Y and Mrs W. Transcript CRO  
1647/1/1.
83. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs F and Mrs Ru.
84. Transcript of interview held by CRO, 1647/1/54, man born 1916.
85. Roberts, The Classic Slum, pp. 33-34.
86. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.4, p.9 and p.29.
87. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs N and Mrs Y.
88. Transcript of interview with Mrs N.

**CHAPTER SIX**

**The difficulty of knowing  
what to want**

*The difficulty of knowing what to want.*

In a speech made at the annual meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank in 1934, the Bishop of Coventry, Dr. Mervyn Haigh, compared the times with 'that great period of Reform, of unique opportunity and subsequent expansion in our English industrial and commercial history; that great age of utilitarianism and laissez faire and orthodox economics one hundred years ago'. He went on to expound on the conflicting spiritual and commercial imperatives of the day.

Then, need was to attract the savings of the community to the extension of the means of production; now, it seems more obvious that there will be no production to extend unless more is spent to prevent many producers 'closing down'. Then, everybody said 'Live within your income; put by against a rainy day'. Now, in a hire-purchase age, many are always inviting us to take what they call 'the easy way', to enjoy while we can and to mortgage our income for years ahead to pay for present delights. Then, everybody talked in the plainest language about wise saving, and they knew what they meant; now, people talk in the vaguest terms about wise spending, and obviously do not know what they mean!

This last jest was met with appreciative laughter, but the problem was a serious one: how *were* people to adapt old values and habits of money management to a new age?

An article from the Quarterly Review of J. Henry Schroder & Co. which had been reproduced in the 'Journal' of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce in 1931, laid the blame for the country's economic plight squarely with the *unwise spending* of the working classes:

... the real cause of the reduction in England's saving power is to be found in the redistribution of the country's income that has been affected by higher wages, accompanied by a falling cost of living, and the high scale of direct taxation, especially on

the large incomes and estates. Since much of high taxation is spent on social services - health, pensions for the aged and widowed, and unemployment benefit - it has meant that the surplus incomes of those who used to have a margin to save has been taken from them, or diminished, and handed over to the wage-earning classes, with the result that a far larger proportion of it has been spent on immediate enjoyment ... Taxation in the interests of the poor which cripples the rich beyond a certain point is bound to hit the poor harder than it hits the rich, and it is evident that this point has now been passed.<sup>2</sup>

Working-class spending of all kinds had, up to this point (and subsequently), always taken place against a background of critical interest - one might almost say carping - whether this came in the guise of philanthropic interest in the promotion of healthier diets, or withering comments of the 'coals in the bath' type. In the 1930s the British population as a whole were subjected to a set of peculiarly contradictory and confusing messages about money, many of which originated with government actions.

During the financial crisis of the early Thirties, readers of The Times could take their pick between articles which urged them to 'Save-The-Pound' (by joining a League founded in response to a suggestion made by the Chancellor of the Exchequer), or to maintain 'wise and courageous expenditure' at the behest of Mr. Baldwin.<sup>3</sup> In 1931 and 1932 everyone was being encouraged to 'Buy British' in a campaign promoted nationally by the Empire Marketing Board. However, this had as its aim a reduction in the country's balance of payments deficit, so the emphasis was unmistakably on the 'British' portion of the slogan rather than the injunction to 'Buy'. After a lengthy period of uncertainty, the government withdrew funding from the Board itself in 1933. Another government initiative of the Thirties, was the 'National Mark' movement started by the Ministry of

Agriculture 'to help the housewife to get English produce of *reliable quality*' (their italics).<sup>4</sup> Yet no equivalent safeguard was extended to guarantee standards and thereby encourage the purchase of new *durable* products, although one of the last Empire Marketing Board posters headed 'A message to producers for 1932', told them to 'Produce goods of sound quality under fair conditions at a reasonable price and let the public know of them'.<sup>5</sup>

Closer to home, the dilatory response of Coventry's local government officers to major items of expenditure constituted a further lesson in money management for the city's population. Debates over municipal spending or saving on infrastructure were regularly rehearsed for the benefit of the local newspapers' readership (see Chapter Two), and filtered out into the local community as a result. The city's built environment not only constituted the backdrop to people's own spending activity, but could be read as the whole spend/save discourse 'writ large'. How might new features such as the Technical College or the By-Pass be interpreted by a local populace anxious for clues to consumer behaviour? Were they a tribute to judicious expenditure or a monument to waste? Were they signifiers of civic pride or modest tokens of municipal pragmatism?

One incident must suffice to illustrate the mixed messages being given out. In 1920 there was every incentive for Coalition councillors to endorse an ambitious plan for a new city Technical College. By making a high level of technical education available, the college would enhance the Coalition's social leadership, maintain the supply of skilled workers to local factories and attract praise from other parts of the country. Plans were accordingly drawn up in 1920. Over a decade later in 1933, the Coalition split over the question of whether or not it could be afforded, and the project only went ahead because it had Labour support.

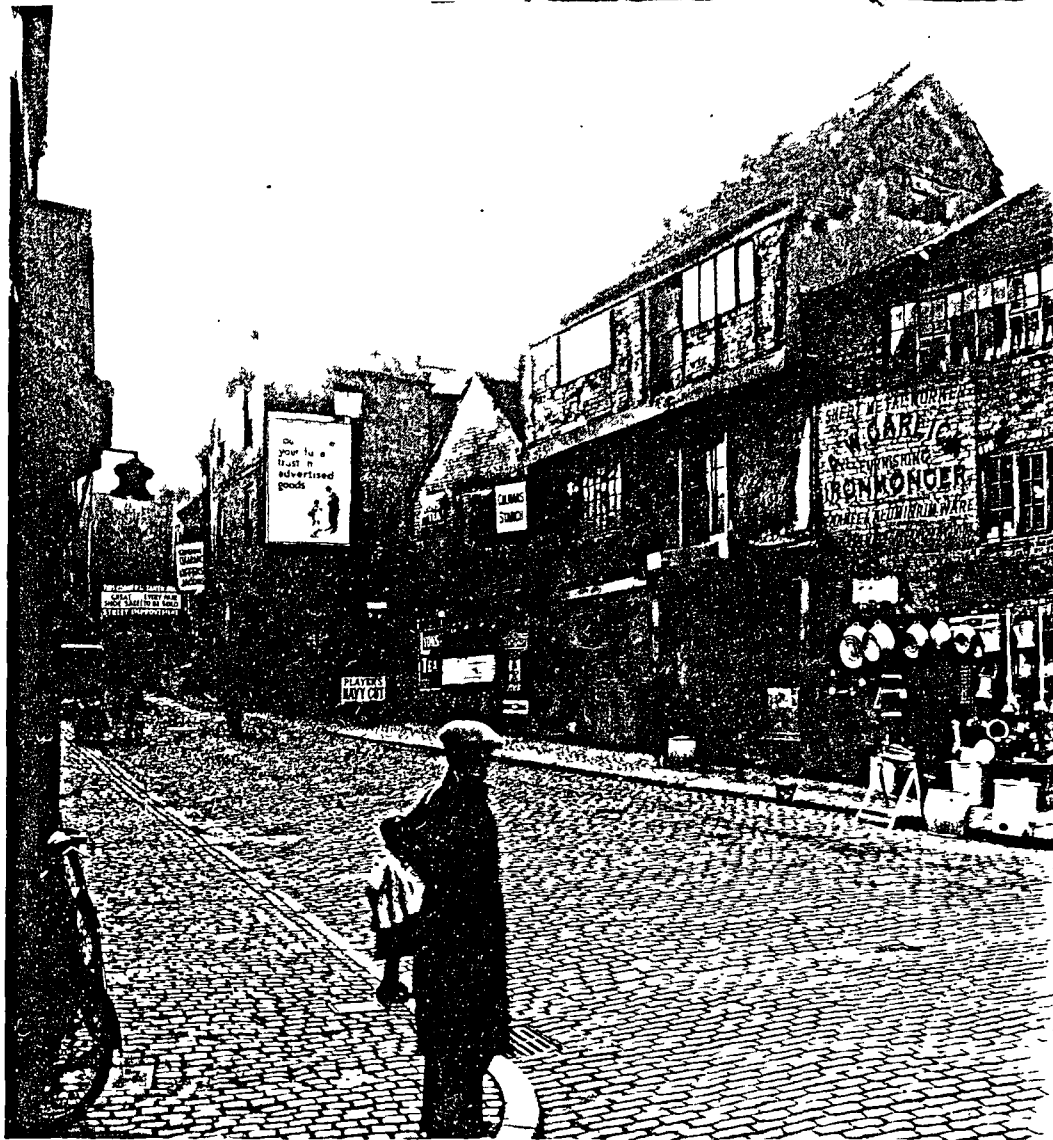
A whole range of messages could be inferred from these events and the debates surrounding them; that some costs may not be deemed

reasonable, that not spending may be as satisfying as spending, that sometimes a policy of 'deferred gratification' has to give way to one of immediate action, that purchases may attract prestige, or reflect compromises, or require protecting from inappropriate use, or need detailed planning. Perhaps the central dilemma posed by Coalition resistance to Labour sponsored expenditure on the city's infrastructure, centring on the difference between wants and needs, sends the most salient message of all; that spending succeeds best when it has the support of all parties. Any doubts that parallels could be drawn between these larger arenas of spending activity and more homely concerns about resource allocation are quashed by the Empire Marketing Board's own de-mystifying reference to the national trade balance as 'your country's housekeeping account'.<sup>6</sup>

The Buy British campaign was regarded as among the greatest campaigns ever known in the history of advertising, and its launch reflected a certain degree of faith in contemporary advertising methods. In an article about it, Stephen Constantine notes that the 1920s 'had witnessed a considerable increase in expenditure on commercial advertising, changes in the organisation of the profession, and, most strikingly, greater variety in the publicity methods available'.<sup>7</sup> In this context, it is worth relating at length the Midland Daily Telegraph's description of the touring Buy British van which visited Coventry in May 1933.

"Nothing new under the sun," they say. Still it is a question whether that can truly be said of the latest idea to further the "Buy British" Campaign. This takes the form of the huge six-wheeler motor van ... which is due in Coventry on Monday next to make a three days' tour of the town ... One calls it a "van" but that is only because it has the appearance of such. In reality it is a mobile electric sign apparatus, which generates its own electricity as it parades the streets, flashing its mesages to the public as it makes its slow and stately progress. Right





'You can place your fullest trust in advertised goods.' Hoarding in the Butcher Row area of the city in the early 1930s.

across the front of the van, and the first features to strike the eye as it comes into view, is a permanently illuminated sign with the words "Buy British" in letters a foot high. On the lower sides of the vehicle these words are emblazoned in large gold letters, whilst on the back is a bold reproduction of the British Lion with the "Buy British" slogan once more repeated. Ever-changing messages extolling the worth of well-known articles of universal use and consumption made and grown in the Empire are flashed through glass screens in letters of brilliant light from the 2,688 lamps in the sides of the structure as it pursues its journey.

The van was mid-way through a tour of the country, visiting some 240 locations and would cover 10,000 miles on its journey.<sup>9</sup>

Constantine also reminds us that T.R. Nevett described the 1920s as 'the golden age of advertising', but this view needs to be interpreted with caution.<sup>9</sup> Writing about America, Stuart Ewen tells us that

Between 1918 and 1923, a greater percentage of articles in the advertising trade journal Printer's Ink, were devoted to ways of convincing "ancient" corporations that advertising was a given of modern industrialism than was devoted to advertising and merchandising techniques.<sup>10</sup>

There is clear evidence to suggest that in Coventry in the late 1930s there was still a perceived need to convince not only corporations, but the audience for advertisements that, 'You can place your fullest trust in advertised goods' (see illustration). In newspapers as well as on billboards the message was amplified and enhanced. The Midland Daily Telegraph sought to convince readers that advertised products were not only more reliable, but also more economical *and* more democratic.

Advertised Goods

are cheaper, quality for quality, than

unadvertised goods. Costs are reduced when production is increased through advertising. The benefits of advertising to the purchasers are obvious ones.

#### JUDGE AND JURY

The final arbiter of advertising is the common man. Unless his unfettered judgement is satisfied, advertising must fail. That is why advertising studies the ultimate consumers of advertised goods and services. It provides an information bureau for daily shopping, daily hygiene, and life-long security. It offers the common man the widest possible choice and a guarantee that advertised goods are worthy of his shrewdest judgement. It never fetters choice, it cannot dictate, it must at all times inform, persuade and convince. That is why ADVERTISING can fairly claim to represent

the best methods of

DEMOCRACY''

Despite the newspaper's continuing efforts to endorse the practicality and respectability of advertising, the GEC 'Loudspeaker' and Alfred Herbert 'News' include many amusing items in which the humour derives from a wry take on the questionable promotional endeavours of shopkeepers, door-to-door salesmen and marketing people (see Appendix Three).

Amongst Coventry retailers, even those centrally located and in the relatively mundane grocery trade, the placing of an order for an advertisement on one of the city's trams seems to have been considered rather a bold innovation. When a customer came into Plevin's grocers in the City Arcade in October 1939 to tell the family that 'their' tram was in Broadgate, young Eric was sufficiently excited to dash out of the shop, camera in hand, and chase after the vehicle as far as the Burges to capture the moment for posterity. The advertisement said simply, 'Plevins,

The Bacon Shop, City Arcade'. If, then, new products *and* the means by which they could be promoted were mistrusted, the problem of working out how to spend wisely was a complex one indeed.<sup>12</sup>

In his 1934 speech to the annual meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank, the Bishop of Coventry did not attempt to furnish an answer but instead retreated to more familiar territory, inveighing against the 'many temptations to extravagance' and re-stating the value of 'proper self-restraint, of foresight, and of prudence, ... and ... affection and love - self-denying love - for wife and children, for relative and friend'. This echoed the view expounded in the parish paper of St John the Baptist Church which denounced those who love 'the two-seater in preference to the perambulator', but recognised that 'difficulties of housing ... make home life in its highest form practically impossible for a large proportion of the working classes'.<sup>13</sup>

It follows from this that one use of working-class income that enjoyed widespread approval was expenditure on housing. Lord Weir had articulated the view held by industrialists that 'Homeowners aren't Bolsheviks' at a speech reported in the journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce in 1920.<sup>14</sup> For its part, Parliament had long since acknowledged the link between poor housing and poor health, and prompted by the exigencies of wartime, had formalised its commitment to change in the Tudor Walters Report of 1918 which established standards for public housing, and the Addison, Chamberlain and Wheatley Acts which provided a certain amount of finance for the same.

Finding somewhere to live was, of course, one of the first requirements of married life, and men were as much concerned with the quality of their domestic surroundings as women. Mr W, for instance, forcefully expressed his satisfaction with the local authority house he and his family moved into from rented accommodation after relocating to Coventry. But finding a home in the city was acutely difficult. The

arrival of forty-two thousand migrants between 1931 and 1939 put incredible strains on the city's supply of accomodation.<sup>m</sup> The Ns applied for a local authority house during this period as well, they heard nothing for ten years. Martin Daunton cites a survey from 1939 which indicates that 31.5 per cent of the houses built between the wars were owned by local authorities, but in Coventry the figure was less than 13.5 per cent.<sup>15</sup>

The 'shopocracy' governing the city in the early years of the century were slow to acknowledge the need for intervention in the housing market. The Housing Act of 1890 enabled local authorities to build houses for those rendered homeless by slum-clearance schemes, but by 1899, the only action taken locally was the acceptance of a Special Committee report which recommended that

as soon as the Council becomes possessed of a suitable plot of land at a reasonable cost an experiment be made by erecting dwellings of from two to three rooms to be let at rents of about 2/6d and 3/6d a week under regulations to secure their proper and legitimate use.<sup>16</sup>

It took a further eight years of concerted effort and a multi-pronged attack from middle-class philanthropists, Labour Party pioneers, Trades Council and the Coventry Housing Reform Council, before anything more happened. The result was the grand total of twenty-two tenements and forty-eight houses. The modesty of the scheme did not preclude the need felt for a spirited defence of the epoch-making activity: the Coventry Herald trumpeted the assertion that 'there will be no charge on the rates'.<sup>17</sup>

The building of the city's first *significant* estate of local authority houses resulted in a rent strike and the accusation that several Coalition councillors who happened to be builders involved in the construction work, had exploited their position to sell poor work dearly.<sup>18</sup> The post First World War expansion of government legislation intended to secure more

working class housing was met locally with blocking tactics and then a mass resignation of Coalition members of the Council's Housing Committee. The power of building interests in local politics prevented the full implementation of the 1923 Housing Act and local authority housing development was restrained in favour of releasing land for speculative development by private building companies. Although the Corporation owned over two thousand houses by the end of March 1926, there were five and a half thousand people on the waiting list by 1927.<sup>19</sup> Of the 23,130 houses erected between 1930 and 1938, only 711 were rented to tenants.<sup>20</sup>

Housing remained a key political issue locally, even pushing local industrialists into a rare engagement with the the Council House, to demand that the Housing Committee make greater efforts to secure housing for workers in the new shadow factories. The first point in the Labour Party's local election manifesto in 1937 was a promise to speed up the rate of council house-building.<sup>21</sup>

#### *Focuses for consumption: Home*

Whatever the meanings of home-ownership were for politicians, owner-occupation had a different set of resonances for the prospective beneficiaries. 'Emotionally, it satisfied the deeply felt needs of ownership, of security and of control of one's environment', as John Burnett has noted.<sup>22</sup> This sense of the home as a belonging, a possession, rather than an investment, comes across very powerfully in the words of respondents. Mrs Ru marvelled at the thought of having 'a new baby, a new pram, and a new house'; Mrs Y stated, 'I was determined I would own a house. I wasn't going to rent one all my life'; and Mrs. N related this response to her new married home: 'I thought I was a queen because, I mean, I was going to have something of my own that I'd never had only when I met [Mr N], ... I was in secondhand clothes'. In a consideration of women and domesticity between 1918 and 1950 Judy Giles conceptualises the

home in the same way: as 'a material object acquired and owned and a symbolic expression of what it might mean to own something'.<sup>23</sup>

Building societies seeking to attract working-class custom in the 1930s exploited the emotional appeal of home-ownership as well as the buyer's good sense (see illustration), but they do <sup>not</sup> appear to have had to overcome any deep-seated prejudices against the taking out of a mortgage. There is no evidence to suggest that the statements they made in their advertisements were anything other than the reflection of commonly held views. Working-class home-ownership was not a new phenomenon in the inter-war period, although levels were marked by strong regional variations usually associated with the extent of working-class organisation and traditions of mutual aid. Daunton cites levels of sixty per cent in South Wales mining towns pre-1914 for example.<sup>24</sup> The very existence of the building societies stands testimony to the longstanding endeavours of the 'industrious classes' to acquire homes for themselves. The first legislation specific to the building society movement came in 1836, and the first known society was founded in Birmingham in 1775.<sup>25</sup>

Burnett has expressed the view that lower-income groups would have experienced greater difficulty in finding the initial deposit than in making mortgage repayments; this despite a reduction in the amount required from twenty-five per cent to between five and ten per cent of the purchase price over the period.<sup>26</sup> In this respect there are some grounds for believing that prospective purchasers in Coventry were better placed than many. The ninety-eighth <sup>h</sup>'Annual Report' of the Coventry Savings Bank for 1933 gives the average amount of investors' deposits as fifty three pounds, an amount more than adequate to pay the deposit for the most expensively priced house advertised by B. Faulconbridge (Builders) in Radford, Coventry (see illustration).

The solid elegance of banking architecture dominated the scene in the centre of Coventry, as Priestley related.

# RADFORD

(OLD AERODROME SITE)

COVENTRY'S MOST CENTRAL ESTATE  
GRANGE MOUTH RD.      CHEVEAL AVE.  
AND  
BURNABY ROAD



<u>TYPE</u>	<u>DEPOSIT</u>	<u>REPAYMENTS</u>	<u>RATES</u>
£515	£25	12/9	3/11
£550	£35	13/4	4/6
£575	£50	13/8	4/9

£5 SECURES YOUR SITE

SHOW HOUSE AND OFFICE OPEN ALL DAY  
INCLUDING SUNDAYS

## B. FAULCONBRIDGE

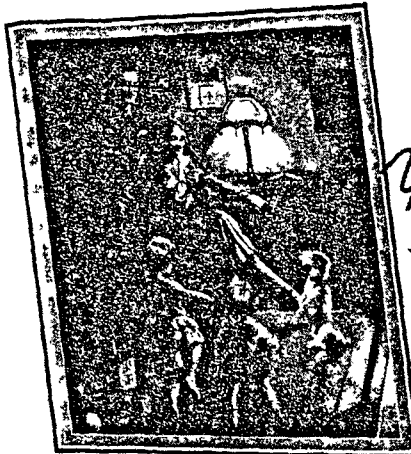
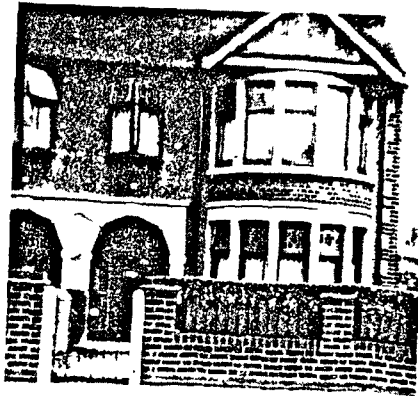
BUILDER

154 CHEVEAL AVENUE, COVENTRY

TELEPHONE 2703

'Average' savers with the Coventry Savings Bank could have afforded the deposit on B. Faulconridge's most expensive houses. Notice in the Alfred Herbert 'News' of October 1938. Overleaf: 'You are happier in your own home than in a rented one.' Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society promotion (undated, inter-war), reproduced from a plate in Martin Davis's Every Man His Own Landlord (Coventry, 1985). Top, a later photograph of the Ru's second property. Below, the house the Paul's bought in 1936.





**YOU ARE  
HAPPIER IN  
YOUR OWN HOME  
THAN IN A  
RENTED ONE**

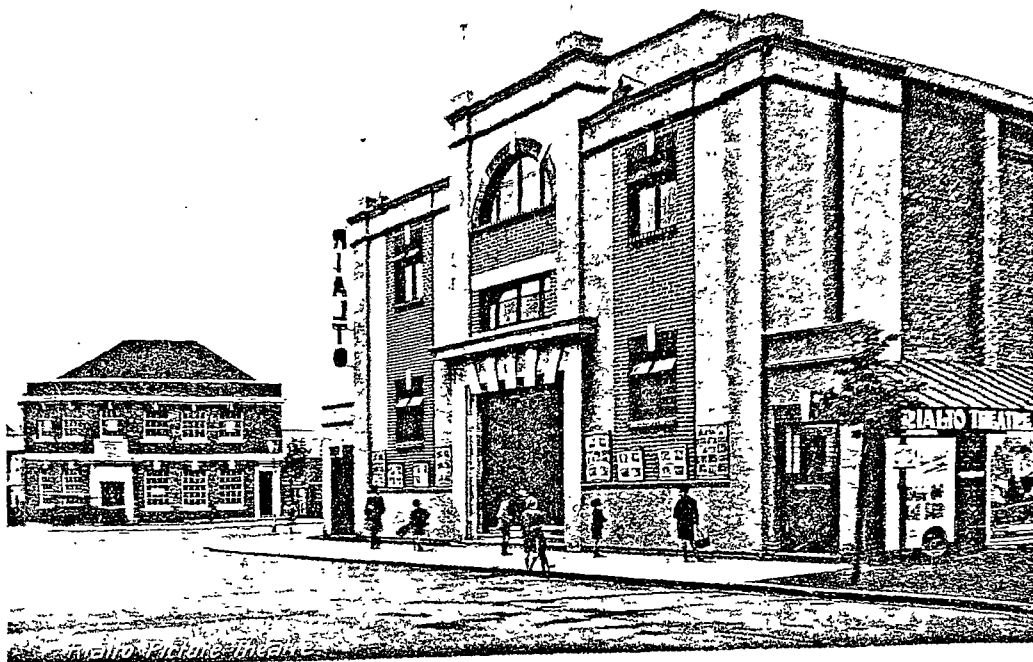
Imagine the sheer joy and pleasure of ownership - the enthusiasm with which you can make your home a place of peace and security, a home of which you can rightly be proud. A haven of rest after the day's work, a happy family to greet you, the pleasant relaxation with which you may sink into your favourite armchair on a Winter's night with an interesting book, and contemplate "This is Mine" - or on a Summer evening when the beauty of your garden is at its best, the quiet rest that may be enjoyed there. You can choose the environment in which your children are to be brought up, and create that happy atmosphere which will mould their characters. Think it over well! Talk it over with your wife, or sweetheart, & decide to **BUY YOUR OWN HOME THROUGH THE "ECONOMIC".** You will never regret it.

**NO HOUSE IS WORTH A LIFETIME'S RENT  
SMALL WEEKLY INSTALMENTS CAN MAKE IT YOURS FOR EVER.**  
REPAYMENTS OF AN ADVANCE OF £100 IN 15 YEARS & 7 WEEKS

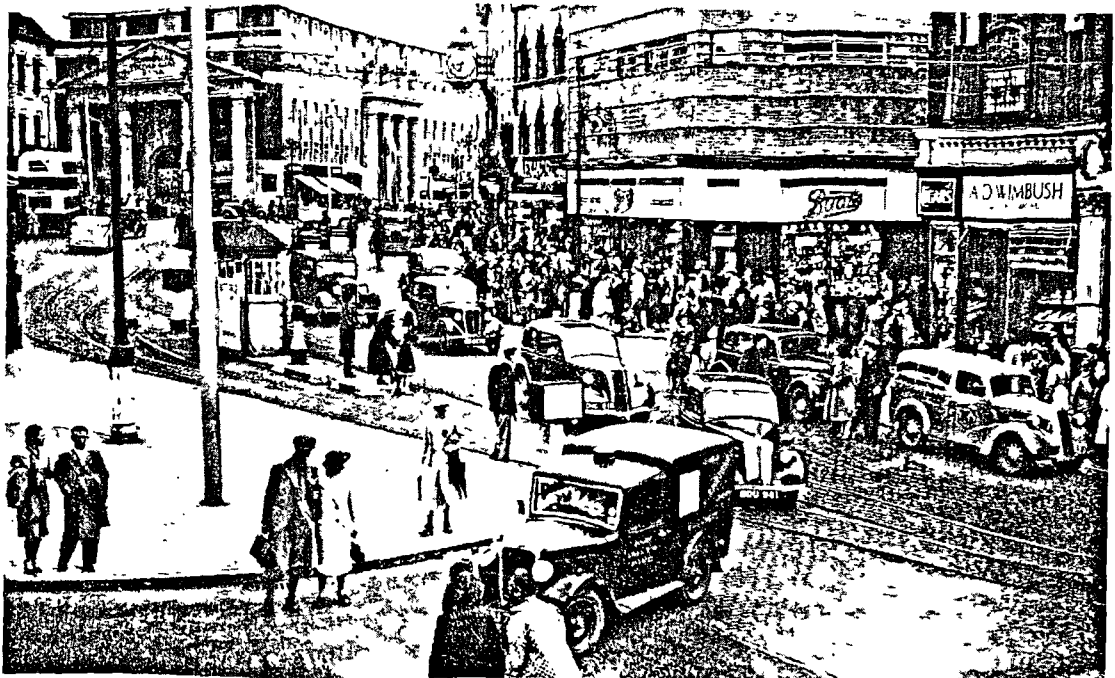
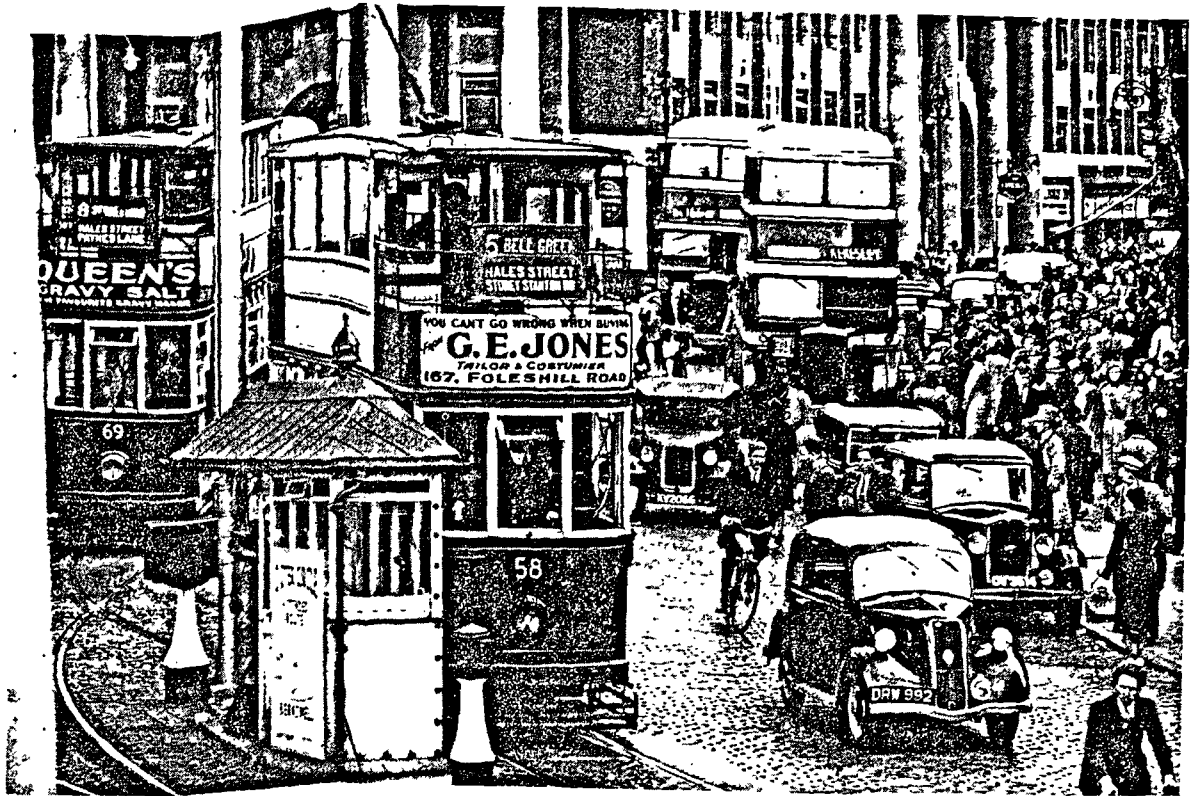
Year	Amount of 20 guineas repaid at end of year	Amount of 20 guineas repaid at end of year	Amount of 20 guineas repaid at end of year
1	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
2	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
3	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
4	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
5	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
6	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
7	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
8	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
9	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
10	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
11	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
12	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
13	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
14	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00
15	£10.00	£10.00	£10.00

NOTE: These instalments of payment must be repaid at the end of the year.

**BUY YOUR HOME THROUGH  
THE COVENTRY PERMANENT  
ECONOMIC**



This page and overleaf, the visibility of banking interests and savings institutions in Coventry. Shown above, Lloyds Bank at the main junction of the recently developed Coundon estate in 1930 (Coventry). The other junction sites were occupied by the Co-operative, Barclays Bank and the Rialto ballroom. Overleaf, two views of the pillars commented on by J.B. Priestley. Top, from High Street, 1939. Below, from Broadgate, 1939.



[I]n the centre, the two buildings that dominate the rest are new and enormous bank offices, very massive and Corinthian and designed to suggest that there is nothing wrong with our financial system. If you do not understand why our banks give so little interest on our loans to them and demand so much more interest on their loans to us ... you should go and have a look at those colossal white stone pillars of theirs at Coventry. Perhaps they will reassure you; that is what they are there to do.<sup>27</sup>

In the surrounding districts, smaller savings institutions lacking classical frontages were also making their presence felt. The Coventry Savings Bank opened a branch on the densely populated and heavily industrialised Foleshill Road in May 1930 for instance, and in the new suburb of Coundon the prime corner sites at the major road junction were tellingly occupied by the Co-operative Society, Lloyds Bank, Barclays Bank and the Rialto cinema.

Between 1929 and 1936 the number of building societies from outside the city with offices in it rose from five to sixteen. These joined the four societies which already had their headquarters in Coventry.<sup>28</sup> The rapid growth of the Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society (founded in 1884 'to promote habits of thrift and independence amongst the industrial classes, and especially to encourage and assist every man to become his own landlord') is especially noteworthy.<sup>29</sup> Between 1920 and 1935 its assets grew by a factor of ten from £350,000 to £3,500,000 and the amount advanced on mortgages grew by a factor of twelve.<sup>30</sup> By 1939, some forty per cent of Coventry families had an account with the Society; at the same time the Coventry Savings Bank could claim to have business with one in six of the city's population.<sup>31</sup> Taken together these figures signify a very highly developed 'savings consciousness' in the city.

Not only were Coventry's savings institutions highly visible, the

habit of saving was being energetically encouraged throughout the city. The list of trustees and managers of both Coventry Savings Bank and the Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society reflects the keen involvement of numbers of Coalition councillors and aldermen. Alderman W.R. Goate, speaking at the annual meeting of the bank in 1934 expressed the view that the managers had always flattered themselves that the Bank was not altogether a commercial institution, but had a certain tinge of philanthropy about it; they [the managers] tried, by working for nothing, and by their general conduct, to do what they could for the city.<sup>32</sup>

Alderman F. Lee, chairman of the Education Committee and present at the same meeting, revealed that the habit of saving was encouraged among Coventry children through school savings schemes. Small deposits were brought into school by the pupils and banked by the Education Committee until they amounted to nineteen shillings, at which point they would be made up to a pound (out of the interest accumulated on the account) allowing the opening of an individual account. His hopes were explicitly to encourage the habit of thrift and bring many more customers and investors to the bank.<sup>33</sup> Implicitly there was clearly a view that small savers become home-owners, and that home-owners vote Coalition; in that respect the 1937 election result must have bemused Aldermen Lee, Goate and their associates.

An entry in the 'Journal' of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce from early 1926 confirms that mechanisms were also in place to encourage workers' saving:

The National Savings Movement seeks the aid of the Chamber of Commerce, and it is satisfactory to find that a good deal of work in this respect is being done in Coventry factories and workshops. There is now a cash investment of £564,000,000 in savings bank certificates, and in addition there are many other forms of thrift and savings. Much money is being invested by

working men in Coventry in the building societies for example.<sup>34</sup>

By the end of the 1930s a number of factors had combined to enable a significant minority of Coventry working people to buy their own homes. The traditional property-owning middle classes were exceptionally under-represented in the city, whereas by 1938 nearly seventy thousand Coventrians were being paid unusually high wages in the motor, aircraft, electrical and high quality engineering trades.<sup>35</sup> At the same time, mortgage interest rates had fallen in the early thirties and building society borrowing terms had been liberalised so that a regular salary of two hundred pounds per annum was widely regarded as acceptable security for a mortgage which might involve repayments of as little as nine shillings a week.<sup>36</sup> This brought home-ownership well within the reach of many skilled workers. The number of ordinary Coventry people with mortgages continued to increase throughout the 1930s, astonishing even the builders involved.<sup>37</sup>

#### Focuses for consumption: Home

Between 1930 and 1939, 26,813 families had the opportunity of moving into a newly built home in Coventry between 1930 and 1939. A staggering forty-four per cent of all houses in the area were no more than nine years old; fifty-six per cent were no more than nineteen.<sup>38</sup> Lancaster and Mason have proffered the view that 'in terms of quality those handsome 1930s dwellings with their double bays and stained glass represent perhaps the highest standard ever in the history of working class housing'; and it is plausible that Coventry's new homes were of a decent quality because of the scandal referred to above.<sup>39</sup> It is difficult to begin to conceptualise the qualitative impact on people's lives for those who moved into clean, sound, new accomodation<sup>m</sup> with plumbing, from decaying, bug-infested properties in the depressed areas.

All of the people interviewed in this study moved into recently built property during the 1930s, and the majority became owner-occupiers. A redistribution of power between husband and wife in the decision-making process about accommodation was taking place in the same way as in the making of choices about furniture. Traditional women's networks for locating and securing accommodation were of less use in a city where rented accommodation was almost impossible to come by (even if the city was familiar to you). Many speculatively built suburban homes were being developed adjacent to new factories; thus it was Mr N and Mr F who spotted future homes on their way to work. It also seems likely that once a man's wage had become the determining factor in a mortgage application, it was increasingly the men who engaged with officialdom.

The researchers of the 1949 Coventry Sociological Survey noted that in addition to drawing distinctions and attributing status according to the system of tenure of residents' accommodation (private ownership, tenancy of privately owned houses, and tenancy of council houses), respondents also applied an 'intricate system of assessing status by the physical structure of the house ... and other appurtenances'. These included the degree of detachment, gables, single and double bay windows.<sup>40</sup> There is some evidence from respondents that status considerations played a part in determining the choice of their houses. In the case of the Rus' second home, Mrs Ru described how her father who originally owned the property paid more money to secure a site on the main road, and was only able to do this because he knew the builder. Mrs N looked around the Ns' first home before the purchase was made, but when she went for a walk on the first Sunday after they moved in, she was disappointed to notice that there were houses with stone bays nearby, which she regarded with greater favour than her own timber framed bay windows. Wishing to speed up sales of mid-terrace houses and knowing that end properties with larger gardens always sold fast, the builder also deprived them of that option by

declaring them already sold - only to put them back on the market later. Even the Ws' local authority home boasted the all important double bays.

But on the whole it seems little of the 'market research' house-buyers now engage in was done then. The accomodation<sup>m</sup> and appointments offered in each house were fairly standardised, and as Mrs Y acknowledged 'those days the builders were only too pleased to decorate your house and give you the little bit of extras'. The Ys 'had a choice of fireplaces, so we got nice fireplaces in both rooms, quite modern, tiles'; Mrs J remembers having to choose wallpaper; most houses would have had grained woodwork, quarry tiled kitchen floors, encaustic tiled hall floors and half tiling on the walls of bathroom and kitchen, most often in white with a black and white border. The Js had to pay extra to have the hand basin and bath in their bathroom supplemented with an upstairs toilet. The Bs remember the gadgetry involved in the kitchen cabinet they were provided with. But this generous level of provision is seldom referred to in promotional material, and there is good reason to believe that with a housing crisis in full swing, little promotion other than a builder's board on site was required.

No effective comparisons appear to have been made between what different developers were offering. The nearest thing to this was Mrs J's assertion that there were discernible differences in the quality of materials used by different developers, and that the choice of their own home was swayed by an uncle's recommendation of its builder. Features likely to attract prestige seem not to have been sought out in any methodical way, although a house once purchased may have been appraised with reference to them. Choices were most often made for the most practical of reasons; proximity to work, family or a favoured church. Once this locational criteria had been satisfied, buyers seem largely to have taken what was on offer. Lancaster and Mason thought it was 'Hobson's choice, though perhaps not a bad one'.<sup>41</sup>



### *Hopes, dreams and hire-purchase*

Mr T stated that his parents who married in 1917 'shared a fixed philosophy about money: do not fall into debt'; a conviction shared by their friends who heard it 'preached from pulpit and altar rail every Sunday'.<sup>42</sup> However, it is apparent that the group as a whole didn't just operate according to an awareness that respectability required the simple avoidance of debt, or even a crudely Smilesian ethos of self-improvement. They were governed by a quietly purposeful belief in the importance of 'making the most of one's advantages', and 'not letting oneself down'. What in present-day parlance we might call the 'maximisation of opportunities'. This manifested itself in, for instance, complicated housing and working careers and the uptake of mortgages. But evidence of adherence to this guiding principle permeates respondents' accounts, even where it isn't explicitly articulated.

Doing the right thing in this regard might mean 'not having what you couldn't afford' (Mrs B); or 'upholding the family honour by paying on the nail' (Mr T); or making sure you 'don't owe them anything' (Mrs Ro). But it also meant 'bettering himself/ourselves': the expression Mrs Ru used in relation to her husband's change of employment from the Singer to the Daimler and their ability to buy a house. Two women used the expression 'Aim high: stoop and you pick up nothing'. Mrs Z used it in the sense of personal morality, but Mrs N used it to explain her patronage of 'high class' shops despite her limited means.<sup>43</sup>

Comments recorded by the Coventry Sociological Survey Team reveal a widely held view that amount of income distinguished one less than the choices one made about its disposal, as for instance: 'People who live in the slums all get the same wages as others with Trade Unionism, yet some live in the slums and others in nice houses - it's not a question of money'.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, a factory worker who owns a car justified himself as follows: 'If a man has a car, then I say, he must be denying himself

something else. But some of them drink and smoke and go out, and then moan because they can't afford a car'.<sup>45</sup> In this complicated rationalisation, ownership of an undeniably status-giving object is represented as proof of personal restraint. Saving, and more expressly saving-up-for, represented the best means of putting this maxim into practice.

How was it that men described by their wives as only having tobacco money went on to buy a variety of items up to and including cars?<sup>46</sup> Only Mrs Ru and Mrs B made any reference to a formal savings account; the holders of which seem likely to have been mainly men. In between the extremes represented by Mrs N who asserted that there wasn't enough money to be able to save, and Mrs B whose extraordinary saving successes have already been noted, lay many more women who tried to put a few coppers aside if circumstances permitted. These saving schemes were informal and included the boxes, envelopes and packets employed by Mrs T and Mrs P, the secret hiding places devised by Mrs Ro and the little tin box with a slotted lid used by Mrs Ru which 'was petitioned off; mortgage, rates, gas bill, electric light and so on', and enabled her to 'drop so much in there every week ... and we used to drop the odd coin in there towards a holiday'.<sup>47</sup>

Some confirmation of the male domination of savings accounts is provided by Mr T who described how:

a prudent pound or two lay hidden in the Post Office or the Co-op Bank. These small savings often helped tide over the rainy day, or paid for the treasured purchase of the year.

This is where our radio set came from.<sup>48</sup>

Although clearly understood to be 'our radio', the actual purchase was made by his father. A complaint made against a neighbour recorded by the 1949 Coventry Sociological Survey is also of interest. 'Mr. Williams' was always 'talking about how much money he has in the bank - the things they've got,

and that he gets paid 9s 6d an hour'.<sup>49</sup> In this quotation the earnings and the bank account are 'his' although the possessions are 'theirs'.

Even if I am correct that it was overwhelmingly men who accessed these accounts, and that their ability to save suggests an ambiguous understanding of their income on the part of their wives, I do not discount the idea that the men nevertheless understood them as family resources.

Hire purchase is invariably cited as the engine which powered the growth in consumption of larger products throughout this period, yet it was emphatically not a facility this group cared to take advantage of, although attitudes toward credit need to be interpreted with some caution. Two women who were vehemently opposed to HP utilised club checks for clothing and clearly didn't regard this in the same light. The distinction they drew may have partly derived from the fact that children's clothing constituted a necessity and the checks a short term commitment, whereas HP was a long term commitment and could be characterised as a means of funding fripperies. This duality of views was not unusual and has been identified by other writers including Richard Hoggart and Paul Johnson.<sup>50</sup>

Attitudes to credit were class sensitive too, and total contemporary condemnation of hire purchase should not be assumed either. In an article entitled 'Shopping Today' in the Radio Times of 12 April 1935, Thelma H. Benjamin presented an unprejudiced account of the strengths and weaknesses of the different methods of payment then available. In it she drew an important distinction between goods bought on 'hire purchase' which remained the property of the firm until they were completely paid for, and the use of 'easy' or 'deferred payments' through which the goods were owned immediately and paid for by a system of extended credit. Defaulters on hire purchase agreements were liable to suffer the misery of the snatchback before the Hire Purchase Act of 1938 provided a limited measure of protection. Despite this Thelma averred that hire purchase was 'usually

the more satisfactory arrangement ... because the prices can naturally be less; you therefore get better value'. This seems dangerously negligent advice to give, but possibly reflects the assumed security of the magazine's largely but not exclusively middle-class readership.

Mrs Ru and Mrs W may have asserted the irrelevance of dreams in relation to the material conditions of their future domestic circumstances, but advertisers in the local paper were nevertheless increasingly likely to use the language of dreaming in their appeals to the buying public (see illustrations). People interviewed in the 1949 Coventry Sociological Survey were able to list items of furniture which the interviewers interpreted as having status-giving qualities and about which they presumably dreamed. These were:

- i. in the hall, a staircarpet and a rug
- ii. in the main bedroom, a full bedroom suite, and
- iii. in the living room, a three-piece suite, standard lamp, occasional table, radio, piano, sideboard or bureau, carpet, wallpaper and ornaments such as brass fire irons.<sup>51</sup>

A female informant described rooms in terms of what furniture 'should' and 'should not' be displayed in it, making it clear that both the selection and location of individual items conformed to widely understood and community-sanctioned norms.<sup>52</sup>

The absence of gadgetry is a notable feature of this list. Only the standard lamp and the radio mark it out as a product of the mid-century: in other respects it has much in common with the prized items described by Robert Roberts for Salford in the pre-First World War period, and the details of a prosperous artisan's home in Birmingham described by Paul de Rousiers in 1895.<sup>53</sup> The basic building blocks of domestic comfort and respectability would appear to have succumbed very slowly to the impact of technological advance.

The inter-war period is frequently characterised as the beginning of

the age of electricity, particularly after the setting up of the National Grid in 1926, and certainly much of the imagery associated with the promotion of electricity and new electrical products referred to a new power source, a new and more democratic servant, destined to liberate time, eliminate drudgery and transform daily existence. But the electrical revolution seems to me to be something of a stalking horse. The Electrical Association for Women for instance, in its 1935 Report on Electricity in Working Class Homes depicts huge savings in time even with regard to domestic lighting (one hour per week per lamp); but as these are oil lamps it is to a great extent establishing a false dichotomy which leaves gas installations out of the picture.<sup>54</sup> Similarly it cites electric cookers as one of the most sought after electrical products, but data available at the National Science Museum suggests that cooking with electricity was slow to gain popularity, so that by 1938 when sixty five per cent. of homes in Britain had electricity, only eighteen per cent of them had an electric cooker.<sup>55</sup> There were sound practical reasons for the lack of impact: electric cookers were slow to heat up, there was inefficient heat transfer unless the base of saucepans was ground absolutely flat, and electricity was relatively expensive. Gas cookers introduced thermostatic controls in 1923, but electric cookers took ten years to catch up.<sup>56</sup> Clearly the Electrical Association was not about to produce a truly balanced picture of what would benefit the working-class housewife most, but leaving the longer established, less fashionable gas out of the picture produces an inaccurate impression of the way power was actually changing lives.

Coventry may be regarded as a pro-electric city, in that industry was heavily dependent on it by this date, and the thousands of new homes were all wired as a matter of course. In terms of the fifty-three pounds stated earlier to be in the average Coventry Savings Bank account, it is worth mentioning that Elsie Edwards (for the Electrical Association for

Women, hereafter EAW) estimated that thirty to thirty-five pounds would be sufficient to buy the wiring for a small house plus an electric cooker, wash-boiler, light fittings, vacuum cleaner, iron and kettle.<sup>57</sup> Both gas and electricity production were in the hands of the municipality and new showrooms occupied a prestige site at the head of Corporation Street, where they sat side by side in a precisely symmetrical architectural design. The EAW reported one commentator's view that some authorities were holding back on their promotion of electricity to preserve their investment in gas, but certainly this would not have been apparent to the average Coventry showroom visitor.<sup>58</sup> Nevertheless, of those major items known to be installed by respondents during this period all but one were stated to be gas. The exception was Mrs J's all electric washing machine, believed to have been bought not from the showrooms but from Matterson, Huxley & Watson, ever-diversifying ironmongers of the city. The Ts who lived in a slightly older property carried out improvements to their home in 1928, during which they had electricity connected and bought a 'grey enamelled gas cooker ... and a gas fired wash boiler' <sup>59</sup>. The only person to be cooking on an electric cooker was Mrs W in her local authority home, in which the copper was powered by gas: seemingly an example of municipal even-handedness. Whilst some of these women owned electric irons and vacuum cleaners by the end of the period, and some of the radios would have been mains-operated by that date too, it would be a mistake to place too much emphasis on the impact of electrification, or to underestimate the growing appeal of gas.

Even between them, Christine Frederick's application of scientific management principles to the domestic environment, the electricity industry's promotion of labour-saving devices, and womens group's attempts to raise the status of housework, seem not to have been able to accomplish the transformation of the kitchen into a focus for consumer pride, or the display of a consciously adopted aesthetic of modernity.<sup>60</sup> The low esteem

in which housework and houseworkers were conventionally held militated against the citing of kitchens and kitchen equipment in terms of status display. Although Mrs Ru admitted after questioning that, 'That was wonderful to me to have a gas copper! Seemed so easy to fill up the gas copper with water'; the story she spontaneously told me about the thrill of acquisition was about a sideboard:

One of the biggest thrills, that's when we came to Coventry, ... we hadn't got a lot of furniture, and I used to keep my crocks in a Tate sugar box in the corner of the room, covered with a cloth ... and my biggest thrill was when [Mr Ru] bought me a sideboard ... to know I'd got a sideboard I could keep my crocks in was wonderful!

Despite the economic exigencies that brought into being the Buy British campaign of 1931, no systematic effort was being concentrated on the broadening of consumer horizons. One obvious means of accomplishing this would have been through education, but a study of the reports made by Her Majesty's Inspectors of Schools in Coventry reveals the fragmentary and inadequate way in which this challenge was being addressed.

Scrutiny of the Board of Education's 1905 and subsequent Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned In the Work of Public Elementary Schools reveals that an explicit educational campaign directed towards the training of an informed buying public formed no part of the intended remit of English schools in the pre-Second World war period.<sup>61</sup> Instead the emphasis was on the inculcation of arithmetical understanding sufficient to manage household accounts and recognise the folly of incurring compound interest charges. The cultivation of thrift and avoidance of debt represented the pinnacle of teaching aspirations in this field. The other area of the curriculum which provided scope to alert students to possibilities for the future was Housecraft, and since this was taken only by girls its success could only be partial. However, here

too, the Board of Education failed to recognise the opportunity that existed and even had a local education board been more perceptive, its capacity to act would have been held in check by Board of Education spending restraints.<sup>62</sup>

In Coventry, despite the local School Board making a commitment to teaching cookery to all girls in 1891, the provision of domestic science education over forty years later was under-resourced and entirely subject to prevailing demographic conditions.<sup>63</sup> During that period the authority, described variously as 'the reverse of spendthrift' and 'far from extravagant' in Board of Education minutes, struggled to cope with the problems created by high levels of inward migration.<sup>64</sup> Areas in the city developed in huge bounds that generated, not dozens of new houses, but five hundred, or a thousand at a time; bringing any number of young residents requiring education. One new school was classified as overcrowded within days of opening, and Board of Education minutes reflect the frustration felt with the local Board's cautious endeavours to keep pace.<sup>65</sup>

Under these circumstances, rooms originally designated for cookery and laundry teaching were quickly reallocated for ordinary class use. So-called Housewifery Centres at a small number of schools intended for city-wide use survived better, but equipment provision was basic. There were no refrigerators, electric irons, vacuum cleaners, washing machines or powered mangles there.

In a 1946 publication called Women and a New Society, the author Charlotte Luetkens set out to address the question of what part women would play in 'an age of plenty - a true democracy?' In a chapter on education Luetkens rose to the challenge of providing an answer to that same tricky dilemma that Bishop Haigh had identified over a decade before. Under the heading of 'The Art of Spending' she wrote:

To take one instance of what the education of women of the future



will have to deal with. Through the centuries, women have been taught the virtue of hoarding and saving - now they have to learn the art of spending. And this does not refer only to a more scientific planning of meals or lighting or clothing. The education of women as consumers in the widest sense becomes increasingly essential the more the modern family is apt to scatter ... This art of spending ... should also educate women in the "art of selfishness", the art of spending for ... herself. Through centuries women, as the conserving sex, have been educated in the virtue of foregoing, of doing without. The negative attitude to spending seems somewhat out of keeping with an age of mass production and an economic system that tries to overcome the blight of unemployment.<sup>66</sup>

A pre-1930 quotation from a local source clearly shows how labour-saving equipment was understood by both men and women to be 'in the gift' of men. It comes from a talk on the subject of 'Falling in Love' given by Miss B. Murby of the Independent Labour Party to a Coventry audience in 1910. In it she expressed the view that 'Having heard of electric stoves, a man would refuse to have the cheeks of his wife coarsened by standing in the fumes of gas stoves'.<sup>67</sup>

The enlightened and caring husband, then, sanctioned the purchase of domestic equipment for his home-centred wife: but, as the efficient management of the home against whatever odds was the source of her self respect and sense of identity, there would inevitably be problems in making visible her need of assistance. Arguably too, in this town at this time, many women were in far less need of assistance than many of their counterparts. Asked what impact her new local authority house had on her domestic workload, Mrs W explicitly recognised that its 'modern' design produced enormous savings in time. It came equipped with an electric cooker and a gas washboiler, and this level of provision was not unusual in the speculatively built suburban properties either. The clean air and

lack of air-borne pollution on which Coventry prided itself must also have impacted on the sheer quantity of cleaning required in most homes. In addition most of these women had only one or two children so that child-care responsibilities were considerably reduced from those experienced with larger families. Without repeating much that was said in the previous chapter, these women's availability for regular leisurely trips into town with mothers and sisters, or visits to the cinema, or time spent in church activities strongly suggest a less pressured existence.

The following instances of women benefitting from other people's inability to maintain HP payments serve as an ironic footnote to this section, as the experience probably served to harden their prejudices against hire purchase:

- i. Mrs Ru's sewing machine was 'taken over' from a friend who could no longer make payments
- ii. Mrs C's family's gas fridge was secured through her employment in the gas showrooms, and,
- iii. Mrs N's 'first washing machine', a gas copper with power driven mangle, was brought to her attention by her club check agent.

Other examples of benefits gained indirectly through credit arrangements included the five sisters whose brother needed to sell five sewing machines to gain a position as a salesman, and whose purchases therefore constituted a family favour; and the Ws whose catalogue agency entitled them to commission of either twenty shillings in cash or twenty-two shillings in goods: a significant incentive to the effectively free acquisition of household goods.<sup>60</sup>

***'Never mind the quality, feel the width!'***

Cheap was a word much beloved by social commentators describing working-class consumption. Orwell's lament about 'cheap luxuries' in The Road to Wigan Pier is well known, but a similar tone is adopted by J.B. Priestley and Richard Hoggart.<sup>69</sup> Yet cheapness was a characteristic abjured by these consumers. This was an era when the relationship between cost and quality was assuredly closer than it is now, and expressions like 'you get what you pay for' and 'you pays your money and you takes your choice' had some validity. As an instance of this, an article in the Alfred Herbert 'News' on buying a new camera included the following advice which the writer clearly regarded as common-sensical: 'As a [box] camera can be bought for such a low price as 8/6d, it is obvious that too much cannot be expected of it ... As the price increases so the equipment improves'.<sup>70</sup>

Within this framework these families sought to acquire for themselves the very best they could afford, but no more than they could afford through careful saving. Patronizing particular retail establishments had nothing to do with snobbery, but was a pragmatic choice based on the perceived likelihood of acquiring better quality goods at such locations, as Mrs J spelt out:

Holbrooks or Anslows, places like that ... those were the places that you always got good attention, knowing that you were going to get good wear, goods that were well made ... I feel that [when] you waited a long time until you saved up your money sufficiently to buy the better goods, then you got both good service, helpful people to serve you, and if you had any complaints whatsoever, they would be sorted out.

The J's' contention was that they '*spent wisely*' (her words, my italics) in order to 'start out with good things' because they recognised that furniture 'wouldn't last forever'. The lengthy survival of a range of different items including a coat, saucepans, brushes and a three piece

suite were frequent points of reference in respondents' accounts. The liberal smattering of brand-named products also stands testimony to their faith in the greater assurance offered by companies with a national reputation.

The two women who evidently retained an interest in bargain-hunting into their eighties, went on to define very clearly the limits of their participation. Mrs Ru, who had described the food shopping responsibilities of her youth when she walked long distances in search of bargain cuts of meat for her family, appeared offended at the suggestion that her mother might have trained her for this task. She interpreted her abilities as a 'natural gift' and explained her philosophy as follows:

I love getting something, you know, cheaper and good value. I really enjoy shopping. But I don't like cheap things, I mean [I] don't buy it for cheapness - I like good value for money and I won't pay 50p if I can get it for forty-five, the same quality ... because it's not doing anybody any good is it?

Paying less than the odds for merchandise identified as being of good quality constituted another aspect of 'doing the best for yourself', 'making the most of opportunities'; but 'cheapness for cheapness' sake' was not to be countenanced. Mrs N similarly distanced herself from the behaviour she associated with shopping at the sales: 'No, I would never go queueing and waiting for doors to open and all that rigmarole, no'.

Working-class homes were frequently criticised for the 'irrational' predilection for three-piece suites (and other 'suites' of furniture), and the amount of expenditure devoted to 'parlours' which then functioned more as social signifiers than family arenas. For those who could afford it the precedent for buying furniture in sets or suites was centuries old and unlikely to yield to sudden change. As more and more people became able to afford it, the retention of suites made good commercial sense for retailers in terms of stock control, ease of selling, and the best use of

limited display space. In fact the purchase of a range of household goods in sets seems to be a characteristic of the changes which took place in consumption in this period; and the emphasis Hollywood placed on matching accessories may well have played a role in promoting its desirability. A family's use of odd mugs to drink tea out of was one of the factors which dismayed Mrs Ru when she visited a workmate's home, unprepared for such a display of poverty. Ownership of canteens of cutlery, tea services and dinner sets, as well as sets of brushes and pans, was all part of this phenomena.

Evidence exists which suggests that more may actually have been spent on bedrooms than 'parlours', and these were the least likely rooms of all to be appraised by strangers. Dennis Chapman found that most newly-married couples spent one-third to half of their total resources on furnishing the bedroom, rather less than one-third on the dining-room, and one-eighth to one twentieth on the kitchen. Where they could afford to furnish a sitting-room, lounge or parlour, this had about as much spent on it as the dining-room.<sup>71</sup> Criticisms focusing on the use of a parlour, or its equivalent, disregard the realities of day-to-day life in a confined area with small children and the human need for a space invested with sentiment and social value. Thus for example the Coventry Sociological Survey expressed the view that:

The front living room is the most suitable for these status displays ... Even [the furniture's] arrangement is often influenced by the impression which will be made on visitors entering the room, so that the best article, usually a sideboard ..., is placed opposite the door<sup>72</sup>

whereas a woman respondent put forward entirely practical reasons for the location of prized possessions in the front room. The survey records her as saying that a front room 'should not really have a sideboard, but it's a very nice piece of furniture and [we] want it out of the way of the

children'.<sup>73</sup> Greater use of this space almost certainly followed as children grew older and more responsible.

Very little emphasis was placed on the expression of individuality in the making of choices. The Bs had seen a dining suite of their friends and wanted one just like it. Mrs J knew what she wanted because her brother and sister had recently married and she approved their choice of furnishings. In this case the selection was related to a particular shop: Mrs J 'said "Oh I love that" and [sister] said, you know, "It was well made, it was a lovely place", and, well, we wouldn't have thought of going anywhere else'. Mrs N bought herself a china ornament which her mother admired, and wondered afterwards why she hadn't just bought her one. The Coventry Sociological Survey recorded the owner of a local hardware shop as saying that interest in particular lines was 'infectious', and that 'when people see their neighbours have them, they come to buy and sales increase cumulatively'.<sup>74</sup> This brings to mind Flora Thompson's description of the much earlier response of the women in her small village to the visits of a man who kept a small furniture shop in a neighbouring town:

On his first visit ... he got no order at all; but on his second one of the woman, more daring than the rest, ordered a small wooden wash-stand and a zinc bath for washing day. Immediately washstands and zinc baths became the rage. None of the women could think how they had managed to exist so long without a washstand in their bedroom ... As to the zinc bath ... Although they had not noticed its weight much before, it seemed almost to break their backs when they could see a bright, shining new bath hanging under the eaves of the next-door barn.<sup>75</sup>

A reminder that what later commentators interpreted as fierce competition among neighbours for status items, could equally be the playing out of uncertainties about what to want, the making visible of the kinds of fears about appropriate consumption referred to by Mary Grieve. This makes

greater sense of the apparent ambiguity in another statement recorded by the Sociological Survey team: 'It's very nice, you know, if one gets a new thing the other will try to get it; it's all very nice'.<sup>76</sup>

These people made modest changes in their material environments within the context of a very slowly modifying range of wants and a community sanctioned and monitored list of 'status' items. Many women benefitted more from the provisions of speculative builders and local authorities than from the recognition and satisfaction of domestic wants within the household. The achievement of home-ownership which turned women into 'princesses', put a ceiling on their freedom to articulate other needs, and the arrival of children provided an external focus for enhanced consumption. As Mrs N commented:

But then, you know, when you've got the children and you look at your money and you think, well they come first, then you lower your standards a bit. Well I've got friends who didn't, but I think that their kids must've, you know, gone short of a few things that I bought for mine.

#### *Focuses for consumption: Family*

In an article entitled 'They had such a lot of fun: The Women's League of Health and Beauty between the wars', Jill Julius Matthews writes:

Standardization of units of time and movement was central to the organization of mass production of goods and the mass provision of services. Tens of thousands of league members spent their working days performing standardized, regimented movements in factories, shops and offices. Come evening, they changed their clothes, and performed standardized, regimented movements in League classes.

She evokes an image of women in symbiosis with their machines, absorbed in a satisfying and enriching (both literally and metaphorically) relationship

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Coventry's Modern Ladies &  
Gentlemen's Hairdressers

Winners of Gaumont Hair  
Beauty (open contest 1934)  
2nd Award Open Gentle-  
mens' Competition (Bir-  
mingham, 1935)

Eugene and MacDonald  
Permanent Waving  
Specialists

Phisio-Therapy Treat-  
ment for unresponsive  
hair.



MEMBER OF THE ABOVE.

Efficiency Salons, Coventry. Undated advertisement (inter-war), included in compilation edited by Alton Douglas, Memories of Coventry: A Pictorial Record (Coventry, 1987).



with technology, framed within a factory ethos. There is, Matthews argues, a reciprocity between the women creating 'durability' both for themselves and in their manufacturing output. Yet there is little evidence elsewhere which convincingly supports this view of 'Machine Age' women. The only advertisement I encountered within Coventry's print medium which evoked this same imagery was for the 'Efficiency Salons: Coventry's Modern Ladies and Gentlemen's Hairdressers' (shown adjacent).<sup>78</sup> The motif of mechanical efficiency utilised in the advertisement was entirely reasonable given the intervention of technology into hairdressing salons in this period, for the Thirties marked the advent of the permanent wave. Yet the relationship between early perming technology and its customers was neither an easy nor a straightforward one. An article in The Times of 21 September 1932 reviewing the annual hairdressing show at Olympia suggested that the 'bewildering array of machinery ... would almost lead one to believe that all the best hairdressers are electrical engineers', but also that there was general agreement that 'modern equipment "frightens the customers"'. During her interview, Mrs N acknowledged not only the pain and discomfort of the perm procedure, but also the misplaced faith in technology which initially allowed her to believe that her own hair would be *permanently* transformed into a crown of curls. In Coventry as elsewhere in the world, women's as well as men's responses to the inroads of mechanisation were characterised by a mixture of naive enthusiasm and fearful apprehension.

Most of the women I <sup>have</sup> spoken to remained very resistant to spending money on themselves. Mrs. W for instance said, 'I hadn't much, but what I had .. I looked tidy and that was all'. Mrs 33 similarly said, 'I don't think in all my married life, I'd have above half a dozen bought dresses'<sup>79</sup>. In marked contrast, children's clothes were often brand named - Viyella, Heatonex, Start-rite and Burberry were all mentioned<sup>80</sup>. The features of a state of the art baby bath purchased by Mrs N were warmly remembered: it was telescopic and folding, made of rubber with pockets along the front

and a canvas lid for dressing on. Children, then, were a significant focus of consumption for both parents. A generation of parents who received pennies and oranges for Christmas themselves, were able to ensure that their children had parcels to open. The sophistication of toys was a noteworthy feature of many accounts. Bud Paul mentioned his Chad Valley game; Mr T (jnr), the miniature gramophone with its own set of black shellac records given to him by his parents to assuage his passion for their own recently acquired gramophone. The photograph taken in the W's' back garden shows a variety of dolls and teddies as well as a toy very similar to the one shown in the Saxess advertisement. These children were indulged with pocket money and sweets, and became brownies and boy scouts. The warmth of relationships with parents may be deduced from comments such as the W's' 'we had our friends at home with the children'; and the

33s

We'd get washed and meet them out [of Sunday School], and then we'd always go for a walk. There'd always be an apple, or chocolate, or something to eat on the walk. And I think we got to know each other so well, during those years, because you talked, and it used to be lovely, and I used to really love that. And the children would look nice and you'd be got up as well.

Communication about money matters was not only better between parents but between children and parents too. The Pauls took their son into their confidence when they were hoping to buy their first house and this necessitated certain sacrifices, so too did Mrs 33:

... not deep down things that would worry them, but we let them know if we were short of money. It was all, let's go steady this week. I can't give you a shilling, it'll have to be sixpence, you know, so it was all understood. I liked them to understand what was going on as regards things like

that.

Even pre-birth, children and mothers were being cared for better. Mrs Ru had nursing help at home after the birth of her daughter, and Mrs B's son was born in a nursing home: this was in contrast to the informal arrangements many women made for their lying in.

Men were buying bicycles and boxing gloves for sons<sup>83</sup>; pianos and accordians for daughters<sup>84</sup>. But they were also buying cars<sup>85</sup>, and surprising wives with handbags and sideboards. They were adopting hair tonic while their wives rejected make-up.<sup>86</sup>

Most of the respondents had too recently come from backgrounds which provided keen insights into the calamities wrought by illness, bereavement<sup>e</sup> and trade upheavals to articulate their prosperity. Mrs N expressed a profound feeling of guilt that 'the war gave them their start' (a reference to the employment opportunities available in Coventry). Mrs B explained that they had found it quite difficult to get used to the idea of having money and to stop saving it. Nevertheless, it seems to me that men's shopping habits were undergoing more significant change in the period than women's. Women typically retained a 'poverty mindset'.

None of the women bought magazines in the pre-Second World War period, but interestingly, the local newspaper showed signs of becoming a more feminised space. Intermittent items of a domestic nature in the early Thirties had resolved themselves into an almost daily occurrence by the end of the decade. In one week in August 1939 for instance, a 'Women and Children' column appeared on Tuesday 1, Friday 4, and Saturday 5. The Midland Daily Telegraph accurately caught the mood of the moment when it published and promoted its own Home-Lovers Encyclopedia in 1933, and launched its own children's club, the 'Telecoons'.<sup>87</sup> Advertisers of domestic products swiftly responded with copy directed at 'Home Lovers'.

## ***Footnotes to Chapter Six***

Unless otherwise stated in a footnote all oral history excerpts are taken from my own series of interviews, and the respondent identified in the main body of the text.

1. Dr. Mervyn Haigh, Bishop of Coventry; speech recorded in the 'Report of the (99th) Annual Meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank' which took place on 30 January 1934.
2. Journal of the Coventry Chamber of Commerce, July/August 1931, p.9.
3. The Times for 29 September 1931 and 21 June 1932.
4. Illustration in C. Merz, After the Vote: The Story of the National Union of Townswomen's Guilds in the Year of its Diamond Jubilee (Norwich, 1988).
5. S. Constantine, 'The Buy British Campaign of 1931' in Journal of Advertising History (GB) Vol 10 Iss 1 p.55.
6. Ibid.
7. Constantine, 'Buy British Campaign' in J of Advert Hist (GB) Vol 10 Iss 1 pp.49-51.
8. Midland Daily Telegraph 6 May 1933.
9. Constantine, 'Buy British Campaign' in J of Advert Hist (GB) Vol 10 Iss 1 p.51.
10. S. Ewen, Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture (New York, 1976), p.32.
11. Midland Daily Telegraph July/August 1939.
12. Coventry Evening Telegraph 26 August 1995.
13. Church of St. John the Baptist Parish Magazine (August 1925).
14. Coventry Chamber of Commerce 'Annual Report' for 1920.
15. M. Daunton, Councillors and Tenants: Local Authority Housing in English Cities, 1919-1939 (Leicester, 1984), p.33.
16. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.219.
17. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, pp.219-20.

18. Midland Daily Telegraph 14 Jan, 28 Feb 1919; cited by Carr, 'Municipal Socialism' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.175.
19. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.221.
20. Lancaster and Mason 'Society and Politics' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.345.
21. Ibid.
22. J. Burnett, A Social History of Housing, 1815-1970 (1978), p.270.
23. J. Giles, 'A Home of One's Own', Women's Studies International Forum Vol 16, No. 3 (1993), p.243.
24. M. Daunton, 'House-ownership from rate books', Urban History Yearbook (1976), pp.21-27.
25. M. Davis, Every Man His Own Landlord (1985), p.4 and p.5.
26. Burnett, Housing, pp.247-48.
27. Priestley, English Journey, p.70.
28. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.61. The others were the Coventry Provident Permanent Building Society, the Coventry Mutual Building Society and the Coventry and District Permanent Money Society. See Davis, Every Man His Own Landlord, illus. opposite p. 91.
29. Coventry Permanent Economic Building Society 'Annual Report' for 1915.
30. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.61.
31. Carr, 'Municipal Socialism' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.174; the 'Report of the Annual Meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank' for 1939 gave numbers of depositors as 34,770. (Population 1939: 224,247).
32. 'Report of the 99th Annual Meeting of the Coventry Savings Bank' (1934).
33. Ibid.
34. Coventry Chamber of Commerce 'Journal', Jan/Feb 1926.
35. Lancaster and Mason 'Society and Politics' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.346.

36. Burnett Housing, p.246.
37. A foreman at the Quinton Road estate told a reporter from the Midland Daily Telegraph of his surprise that not one of the new homes was to be let. The article appeared on 15 July 1936.
38. Thoms and Donnelly in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.35; Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry, p.61; Chisholm (ed), Marketing Survey (1938), p.161.
39. Lancaster and Mason 'Society and Politics' in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.345.
40. City of Coventry, Planning and Redevelopment Committee, 'Report of the Sociological Survey Team' (1955), p.14.
41. Lancaster and Mason 'Society and Politics in Twentieth century Coventry' in Lancaster and Mason (eds.), Life and Labour, p. 345.
42. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.31.
43. Mr T ibid. Mrs Z Transcript CRE 1647/1/2.
44. Coventry Sociological Survey 'Report' p. 37/49. (A system of dual page numbering is used in this compilation of papers).
45. Kuper, Living in Towns p.73.
46. The wives of Mr L and Mr Ru both expressed the view that their husbands only had tobacco money. Both men owned cars.
47. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.31; Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.28.
48. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.31.
49. Kuper (ed.), Living in Towns, p.73.
50. P. Johnson, Saving and Spending, pp.150-52. R. Hoggart, 'New Voyagers in Never-Never Land', Independent on Sunday, 1 March 1992; cited in A. Bott, 'Who Said It Was Affluent?' (MA Thesis, University of Warwick, 1992), p.52.
51. Kuper, Living in Towns, p.161.
52. Kuper, Living in Towns, p.71.
53. Roberts, Classic Slum, pp. 32-36; account cited in Burnett, Housing, pp.163-64.

54. E. Edwards for the Electrical Association for Women, Report on Electricity in Working Class Homes (London, 1935), p.27.
55. E.A.W, Report, pp.16-18; Science Museum exhibit 'The Secret Life of the Home'.
56. Science Museum exhibit 'The Secret Life of the Home'.
57. E.A.W, Report, p.38.
58. E.A.W, Report, p.34.
59. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.33.
60. C. Frederick published Household Engineering: Scientific Management in the Home in 1920 and Selling Mrs. Consumer in 1929. She is mentioned in the E.A.W. Report although not extensively. The Report partly owed its existence to help promised to the Secretary of the Sixth International Scientific Management Congress to be held in London in 1935, at which the question of scientific home management was to be reviewed: this information from p.5 of the Report.
61. Board of Education, Suggestions for the Consideration of Teachers and Others Concerned in the Work of Public Elementary Schools (London, 1905).
62. Most Local School Boards would be dependent to some extent on loans sanctioned by the Board of Education. Obviously a Board could spend any amount it liked if it could find an alternative source of finance.
63. PRO ED 21/18140 Letter from the Clerk to the Coventry School Board to the Secretary of the Department of Education dated 19 March 1891.
64. PRO ED 21/41914 Board of Education minute of 21 Oct. 1931; and PRO ED 21/41906 Board of Education minute of 22 Jan. 1931.
65. PRO ED 21/41819(b) Board of Education minute dated 8 October 1934 on overcrowding and frustration. For another example see PRO ED 21/18113 undated Board of Education minute initialled E.H.C. c.1911. The minutes betray a fairly constant tone of irritation.
66. Luetkens, Women and a New Society, p.75.

67. J. A. Yates, Pioneers to Power (Coventry, 1950), p.48.
68. One of the five sisters was Mrs Y (Transcript CRE 1647/1/5).
69. See G. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier (Middlesex, 1972), pp. 80-81; cited in J. Stevenson, Social Conditions in Britain Between the Wars (Middlesex, 1977), p.24; Priestley, English Journey, p.69; 401-03; and Hoggart, Uses of Literacy, p.33.
70. Alfred Herbert 'News', Jan/Feb 1933.
71. D. Chapman, The Home and Social Status (London, 1955), p.42.
72. Coventry Sociological Survey, 'Report', p.15.
73. Kuper, Living in Towns, p.71.
74. Ibid.
75. Thompson, Lark Rise to Candleford, pp.125-26.
76. Kuper, Living in Towns, p.71.
77. J. Julius Matthews, 'We had such a lot of fun: The Women's League of Health and Beauty between the wars' in History Workshop Iss 30 (Autumn 1990), p.43, p.50, p.47.
78. I am drawing a distinction here between the *imagery* of modernity/efficiency and the actual qualities one would expect to see attributed to utilitarian goods such as cookers.
79. Transcript CRE 1647/1/33.
80. Transcripts of interviews with Mrs Ru, Mrs F, and Mrs N.
81. Paul, Sent from Coventry, p.37.
82. Taylor, Seide Maises, p.63.
83. Paul, Sent from Coventry various.
84. Refers to Mr W.
85. Cars are mentioned by CRO 1647/1/1, Mr Fe, Mrs Ru, and B. Webb. The latter is recorded in Hillfields History Group, My First Job (nd) p.19.
86. Refers to the Rs.
87. Midland Daily Telegraph Home-Lovers Encyclopaedia promotion 1 May 1933.



## **CONCLUSION**

It is worth quoting at length Priestley's bemused reaction to Coventry on his arrival there in 1934.

As I left the glorious pastures of the Cotswolds and turned my face towards the Black Country, the sky should have darkened. As it was, I had a brilliant morning for my little cross-country journey; and the nearer I drew to Coventry the better it became. When I actually arrived there, late in the morning, there was not a single shred of cloud in the sky, an exquisite luminous azure. Everything was crystal-clear. Not an outline anywhere had the faintest blur. The brick walls, full in the sun, might have been newly painted by Vermeer. Distant factories, rigidly defined in three dimensions, had a Canaletto quality. Things near at hand, a passing bus, a big yellow poster, dazzled and hurt the eyes. Coventry itself, ancient steeples and motor-car factories and all, was stated so emphatically against the green hollow and the silken sky that to see it gave one a sharp jolt of pleasure. There was the famous old city of the three steeples, and the equally famous new city of bicycles and motor cars and wireless sets, and all so clear that it might have been transported into Italy. This was all wrong.<sup>1</sup>

Priestley's initial surprised summation that Coventry was not the grim place he had anticipated was largely an accurate one. Setting aside his painterly references, this was a place that was capable of giving one 'a sharp jolt of pleasure'. There were sound technical reasons why the atmosphere was cleaner than in many industrial settings: the use of electricity as a power source was 'almost universal'.<sup>2</sup> The city still had a place in guide books such as Henry James's checklist of quintessential English towns, English Hours, and its significance as a tourist destination was recognised by the war-time Advisory Panel on the Redevelopment of

City Centres (APCC).<sup>3</sup>

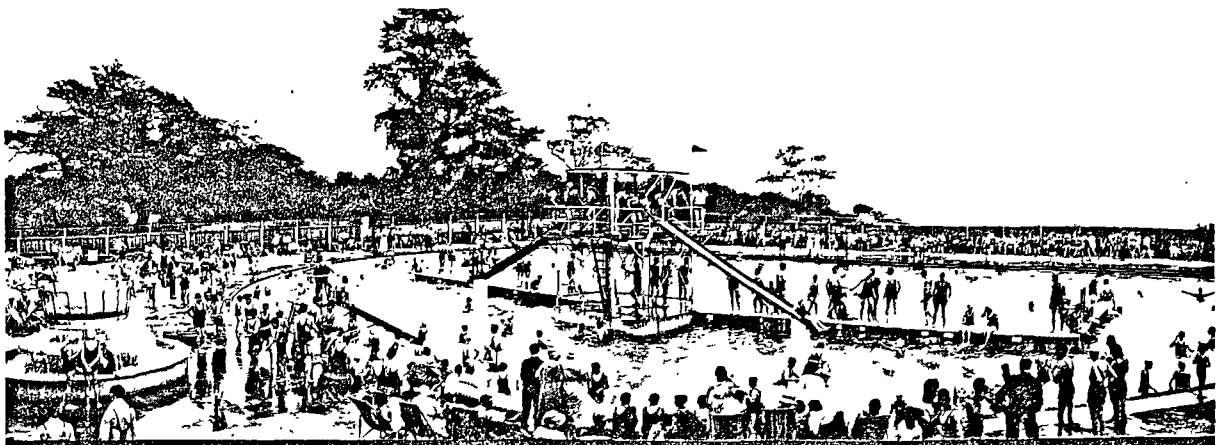
For those who migrated from the more heavily industrialised north, visits home were a cause for counting one's blessings, and for first generation Coventry kids, a sobering revelation.

A huge black slag heap towered above the whole district. A perpetual haze of smoke, soot and grime laced with a cloying, choking smell enfolded their small terrace house, mercifully blitzed to rubble in 1941 without any casualties. Behind was a tiny yard and more and more similar streets. The houses formed the standard basic unit for an industrial worker in Lancashire, complete with their two up and two down and outside loo. Nowhere was there a patch of grass or a view of blue skies, and trees and shrubs were non-existent ... When I visited Grandma Taylor's home in the late 1920's, it was an eye opener for a young lad from the cleaner zones of the Midland counties.<sup>4</sup>

Undoubtedly, some migrants experienced more conflicted feelings about their relocation; Mrs Ru for instance, 'couldn't bear it, after living at the sea'.<sup>5</sup> But for the majority, the dominant emotion was gratitude for the opportunity for them or their partner to work.

Coventry represented a high point in many people's accommodation profile. This was highlighted by Jane Walsh's experience when she afterwards moved to London. Her home in Coventry was 'heaven', but following the move she had to revert to 'standing in a cold draughty scullery to wash, and bathing in an old zinc tub - filling it with kettles of boiling water and emptying it with a bucket'. This move took her 'right back to [her] childhood' in the 'slummiest and dirtiest quarter' of Oldham.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from environmental considerations and the availability of good quality housing, account must be taken of what is now popularly designated the 'feelgood factor'. The sporting and social activities of dozens of



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1910 Assisted by Miss A. HAWKINS, Professor REG. WILLIS and Miss L. WATTS 1935

*Holder of the N.S.A. Bronze Medal and  
Silver Medal. for Waltz and Two Step.*

*Holder of the N.S.A.  
Bronze Medal.*

Coventry had competing cinema chains, numbers of the new super pubs, four skating rinks and swimming facilities. In terms of tertiary provision, it is difficult to recognise the 'cultural wasteland' identified by many post-war commentators.

clubs constituted by employees filled the pages of works' papers. Church halls shook with dances organised to raise funds for Coventry's New Churches Scheme: the number of dance schools rose from six to twenty over the period.<sup>7</sup> The National Amalgamated Union of Shop Assistants, Warehousemen and Clerks had to appoint a social secretary because trade union work was not receiving 'the attention it warranted on the weeks that socials were run'.<sup>8</sup> Coventry had competing cinema chains, numbers of the new super pubs, four skating rinks and swimming facilities (see illustrations)<sup>9</sup>. The Coventry Hippodrome Orchestra featured regularly on BBC Radio, and people travelled from Rugby, Kenilworth, Leamington, Warwick and 'even Birmingham' to visit the Hippodrome theatre. Coventry RFC were regular winners, and the 1930s were the 'promotion days' for Coventry football club.<sup>10</sup>

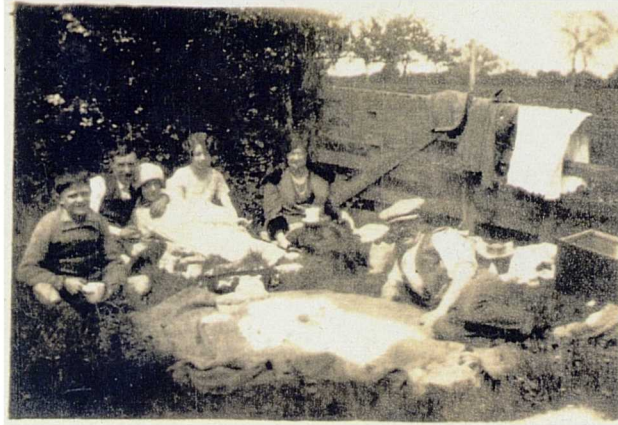
The power of sport, and football, in particular to lift the morale of whole populations is widely acknowledged, so the upward trajectory of the 'Bantams' between 1931 and the outbreak of war is of some moment. The acquisition of Clarrie Bourton in 1931 marked the beginning of 'the most successful and exciting period for City to that date ... the Bantams now had a goal scoring centre who was the idol of the fans'. 'Wins accumulated and goals scored soared'. League positions improved from 12th in Division Three South in the 1931-32 season, to 6th, 2nd, 3rd and finally in May 1936 the club gained promotion to Division Two where they remained a leading side, teetering on the brink of further promotion. A rash of children christened Clarence at this time apparently constituted 'a salute by happy fathers to their hero'.<sup>11</sup>

Coventry had thirty parks and open spaces covering 648 acres.<sup>12</sup> New suburban homes had front and back gardens which were cultivated with some enthusiasm, if the evidence of gardening competitions is to be believed.<sup>13</sup> In addition, the open countryside was within easy walking distance and the

ubiquitous bicycle provided the means for more extensive exploration. Images from the public and the private sphere testify to the appeal of open air attractions such as the picnic. Family photographs from the Ru and Paul families are shown, as are the intriguing pair of advertisements taken from Coventry Carnival programmes, which are suggestive of a 'fight back' from brewery chain Mitchells and Butlers.

Coventry had a new Technical College, a new isolation hospital, a new department store, by-pass and airport. Plans for a museum and art gallery were underway. If the city was served badly by its retailers, arguably it did better with its developers. W. Bassett-Green, grandson of silk manufacturer Eli Green, built shops and houses, and donated the equestrian statue of Godiva which has a prominent place in the centre of the city.<sup>14</sup> F.H. Turner planned the complex of shops, cinema and ballroom at the Coliseum in Jordan Well, although he relinquished control of the project before completion. Charles Orr, an Irish building contractor became proprietor of Orr's '5 Star' cinema circuit and the Rialto Casino Ballroom. H.T.A Philpot, his erstwhile partner, opened the city's first 'super cinema', the Rex (see illustration p57).<sup>15</sup> Modernity was both the word and the mood of the moment.

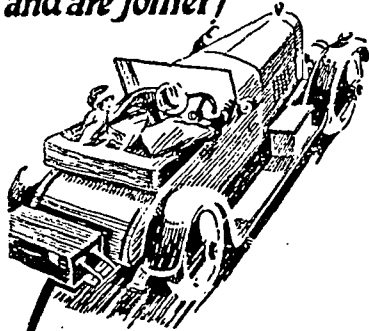
Priestley's description of the town as a place where engineers talked endlessly about gears and magnetos in bars may also have been substantially true; pride in craft-based skills retained a dominant place in local society.<sup>16</sup> But after marrying and settling down, those same engineers devoted less time to talking about widgets and more time to buying them; within a circumscribed range. It is paradoxical that a piece of research designed to give greater prominence to an area of activity overwhelmingly ascribed to women, has resulted in yet another discussion of masculine workplace culture and the revelation of a distinct male culture of shopping which has shaped, influenced and arguably curtailed



The photographed picnic: a phenomenon of the period. The top picture is of Mrs Ru with her parents, brothers and sister-in-law. Mr Ru is almost certainly the photographer. Below, the Pauls in the summer of 1932.

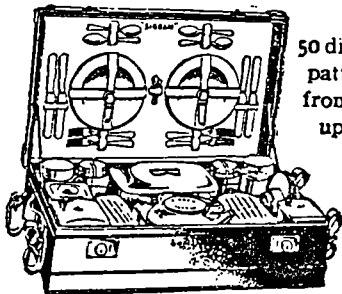
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These outfits soon save their moderate cost. They comprise everything essential for dainty outdoor meals, including the latest SIRRAM Patent Kettle (carries water) the only Spirit Kettle which boils 3 pints in 12 minutes—indoors or out.



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Get Off The Beaten Track—Explore The Country



The SIRRAM "Wasp" Kettle Set

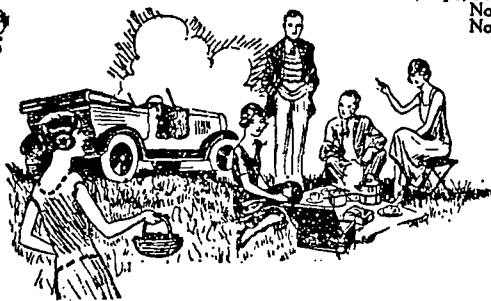
Patent polished tinplate kettle with brass screw lid and spout stopper and tea strainer neck. Patent stand, stove and spirit tin. In strong carton.  
No. 20 1 1/2 pints 3/6  
No. 21 2 1/2 pints 5/-



"SIRRAM" Tea Basket

Flat lid basket, patent tinplate "Wasp" kettle, stand, stove, spirit tin, tea and sugar tin, cream flask, cups, saucers, spoons and provision box.  
No. 992 2 persons 17/6  
No. 994 4 persons 27/6

EVERY OUTFIT  
PRACTICAL  
IRRESPECTIVE  
OF PRICE



SAVE THEIR  
COST IN A  
FEW OUTFITS

## Matterson, Huxley & Watson, Limited

Cross Cheaping and Hales Street, COVENTRY

TELEPHONE 4081 (6 lines.)

Advertisement for Matterson, Huxley & Watson, Ltd., ever diversifying iron-mongers of the city. Taken from the 1928 Coventry Hospital Carnival 'Official Programme'. The statement that 'picnic meals cost nothing' is disingenuous given the range of products that are being promoted. The Carnival was itself another popular form of outdoor entertainment.



# Guess where he's going



...you're wrong...he's going to have a

# Mitchells & Butlers

*"Good Honest Beer"*



'Guess where he's going?' An advertisement strongly suggestive of a 'fight back' by Mitchells and Butlers against healthier forms of entertainment. Taken from the 1935 Coventry Hospital Carnival 'Official Programme'.

women's traditional sphere of autonomy.

The range of electrical goods which were among the most iconic new products of the period, failed to make the impact that might have been expected. That the purchasing power existed to buy them is not in doubt: the alternative uses to which surplus income was put amply demonstrates that it did. Instead, a combination of factors effectively dampened demand. These may be summarised as follows

- 1) a failure to familiarise children with new domestic technology in the school environment,
- 2) the ambiguous status of advertised goods, still a problem at this time, and particularly problematic when other means of consumer education were severely limited,
- 3) a failure by advertising and marketing departments to target boom areas if their class profile didn't fit the expected norm for purchasing power,
- 4) the failure of Coventry retailers to respond pro-actively to boom conditions,
- 5) the retailing circumstance that saw many new goods being sold in very masculine environments,
- 6) the failure of local authority gas and electricity showrooms to differentiate between the two power sources for selling purposes,
- 7) the use of inappropriate imagery which allowed men whose wives were already enjoying the benefits of a modern home to decree that they didn't need magic/'servants'/robots in their lives as well.

As Colin Campbell described in his World of Goods chapter on eighteenth century aristocrats, it takes more than capital to create a 'modern consumer'.<sup>17</sup> The prevalence of owner-occupation in 1930s Coventry, the number of savings institutions and the distinctive growth of jewellery retailing in the city, all suggested a tendency to direct money in ways

that would more definitely repay investment. For this group of people, a tentative move was under way from a concept of sufficiency, to a 'pragmatics of prosperity'.

However, many homes did enjoy the benefit of some of the new products without a cash transaction and its attendant negotiations having had to take place. Many speculative builders incorporated them into their housing packages, as did the local authority to a lesser extent. The Corporation's own gas and electricity showrooms promoted the hire (as opposed to hire purchase) of a range of products which reduced fears about investing in comparatively untested technology and/or the cost of maintenance. The arrival of children seems also to have marked a pragmatic shift in men's attitudes towards purchase, in relation to bigger wash loads for instance.

Over a period of twenty years, women's histories have imputed an over simplified circuit between producers, goods and women during this period. Catherine Hall, for instance, writing in 1977 said that

A second important element in a changing view of home and family was the shift which was taking place in capitalist production to a much greater stress on domestic consumption rather than on production for export ... This process was much accelerated in the post [First World] war period with the move into electrical products for example. The working-class woman at home became a more important consumer than she had been.<sup>10</sup>

In her recent work on women's class relations in inter-war workplaces, Miriam Glucksmann similarly conflates opportunity with actuality.

Since women rather than men held the purse strings, industry geared its marketing, sales promotion and advertising campaigns towards them. Many of the new mass-produced commodities which could now be bought replaced goods previously made within the home or, in the case

of domestic appliances, made less arduous the labour that had to be extended on housework. In this way women began to buy more things ... Although this process was particularly evident in middle-class households ... certain of the new commodities were also within the reach of better-off sections of the working class living in the South East and Midlands.<sup>19</sup>

Even women's organisations of the time exhibited a Janus-like duality with regard to their members' potential as shoppers. The Townswomen's Guild for instance, had a view of its membership of 'ordinary housewives' as 'used to living in a quite narrow environment, frequently with very little experience of the world beyond her own domestic one, often unconfident of her ability to do such things as handle money or speak in public', as Caroline Merz has described.<sup>20</sup> At the same time, the presidential address of 1933 asked Townswomen to

think also what it means in terms of wealth that our great textile, cotton, wool and silk industries are carried on mainly by women, that we have one million women employed in agriculture, and that especially in the clothing, catering, electrical and light engineering trades we are largely producers as well as consumers.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the 'dampening' factors outlined above, a causal relationship taking greater account of 'family time' is needed. On top of Rowntree's poverty cycle, a further (prosperous working-class) women's cycle of consumer activity can be overlaid. This posits the period between leaving school and leaving home as a time when acquisition satisfactorily took place, with items of dress and bottom drawer provisions typically predominating. In the period after marriage, the curtailment of paid employment, and the novelty of managing a relatively well-appointed home tended to minimise non-routine acquisition. The starting of a family signified the beginning of a new phase of acquisition.

The growing emphasis on children as a focus for consumption amongst this cohort of adults may be related to the relentless exposition of domestic ideology over the previous quarter century. The reduction in family size allowed a level of material indulgence that would hitherto have been impossible. However, men proved to be at least as prone to this kind of consumer activity as women. Men additionally justified less obviously child-centred purchases by reference to the family, thereby confirming Amanda Vickery's view that men's consumption was 'occasional and impulsive, or expensive and dynastic'.<sup>22</sup>

This research suggests that at any period of time, types of shopping carried out are divisible into three broad bands. The first is for items so routinely bought as to render the activity routinised and boring; food would be a typical example. The second is for items that present a more interesting challenge but are familiar enough to produce the 'charge' described by Alison Light: shopping as 'pure pleasure ... an extension of ego and autonomy'.<sup>23</sup> A typical example of this might be clothing. The third is for unfamiliar items, the purchase of which is anxiety-inducing, typified by shopping for technology. In general the expense involved is progressively greater through bands one to three. The boundaries of the bands are not fixed and would shift in different eras: we are, for instance, currently experiencing renewed anxiety about food purchases of various kinds. Access to capital and personal preferences also overlay these typologies. Dorothy Davis' (1966) statement that the 'Oldest shopping style of all ...'; one which privileged skill and reputation, 'is reserved nowadays for the sale of goods that have come onto the market ... fairly recently', is particularly interesting in the context of band three.<sup>24</sup>

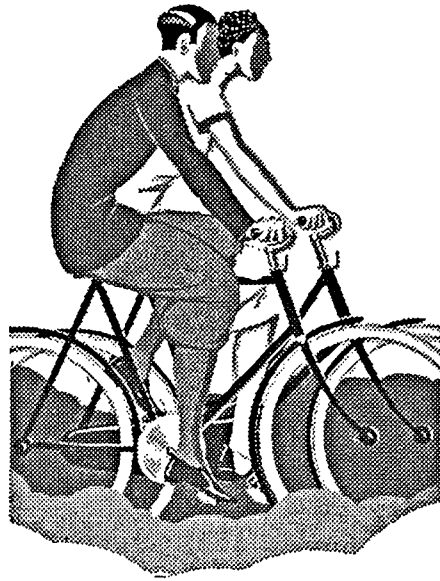
It was also in this band that women's consuming horizons were most susceptible to male influence in 1930s Coventry. The need for the

'breadwinner's sanction' for extraordinary purchases, combined with men's imputed mechanical prowess (often but not always real in the case of the city's engineers), made acquisition targets vulnerable to veto, or worse still, prevented them from ever being identified. This research shows that as with contraceptive practices, consumption practices were most effective (in so far as both people's acquisition ambitions were recognised), when husbands and wives worked well as a team. Imagery in local press advertisements both endorsed and promoted this view of modern domesticity as active togetherness (see illustrations).

In an article published in 1994 Sue Bowden and Avner Offer explore the consumption of household appliances since 1920, struggling to explain their differential take-up in a non-'narrative' way, despite the lack of explanatory power of price/income diffusion models which they acknowledge.<sup>25</sup> However, their definition of goods as either 'time-saving' or 'time-using' corresponds perfectly with a division of appliances into housework-related or entertainment-related, so it is therefore unsurprising that the answer to the question they pose, 'Why is the diffusion of time-using goods so much faster than that of time-saving goods?', is ultimately

Unlike 'housework' appliances, 'time-users' affect the satisfaction of *all members* of the household directly, men and children as well as women. As status goods, they impinge (much more than time-saving goods) on the satisfaction of males, and to the extent that males have greater power within households, these goods acquire priority for purchase.<sup>26</sup> (their italics)

Furthermore, if we compare Bowden and Offer's statements that 'a primary function of time-using appliances is to provide sensual arousal', and 'the senses are easy to stimulate in novel ways', with Judy Wajcman's that 'Machines can clearly evoke powerful emotions and sensual delight for men', we can see that such goods 'work' in three distinct ways.<sup>27</sup> They appeal



**THE  
RUDGE-WHITWORTH  
BICYCLE**

Prices range from £5 10s. 0d. for the  
Juvenile Models to £8 0s. 0d. for the  
Aero-Special Models

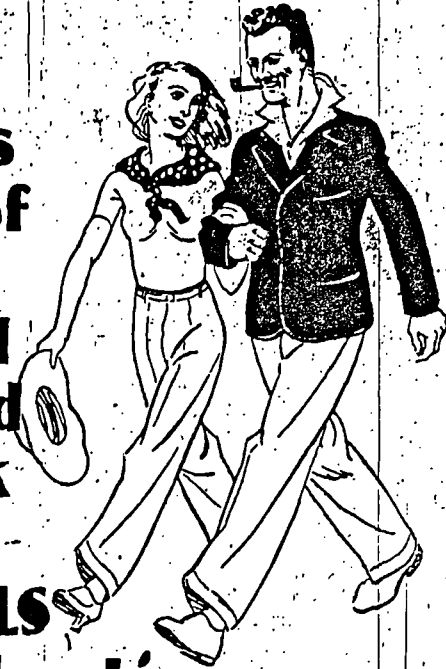
Ask for current list showing all  
the Rudge-Whitworth Bicycles

**RUDGE  
WHITWORTH**

RUDGE-WHITWORTH, LTD., COVENTRY

Imagery in local press advertisements both endorsed and promoted a view of modern domesticity as active togetherness. (Here and two consecutive pages). Rudge Whitworth advertisement from City of Coventry Official Guide (1927). Fred Burn advertisement from Midland Daily Telegraph of 12 May 1933. Coventry & District Co-operative Society advertisement from Coventry Hospital Carnival 'Official Programme' for 1928. See also image adjacent p.244.

Every  
Jack is  
proud of  
Jill...  
and Jill  
is proud  
of Jack  
in



**FLANNELS**  
at holiday time

Free Flannels  
for all by

**FRED BURN**

With every order placed during the next few days we will present FREE, GRATIS and for NOTHING, a pair of these famous Flannels..... but order NOW if you want to take advantage of this offer.

*Suits from 35/-*

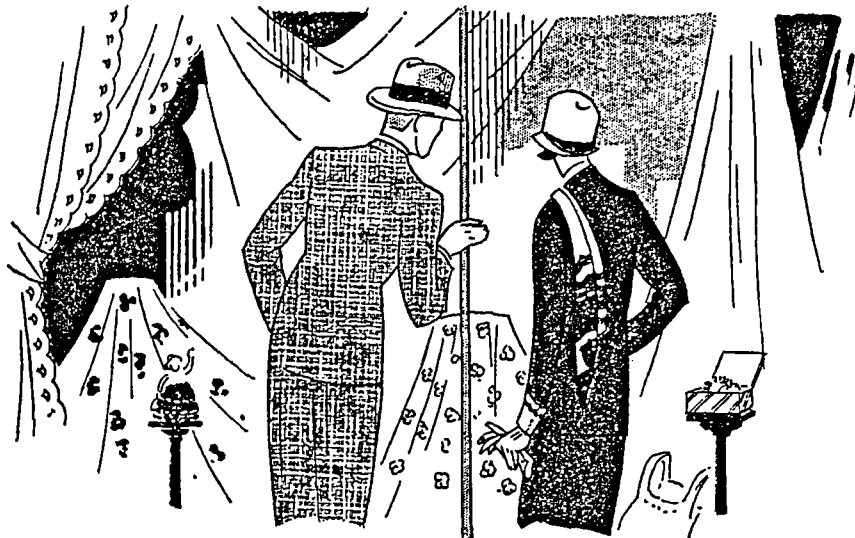
**24, CROSS CHEAPING, COVENTRY**



# QUALITY, PRICES, SERVICE

*and then*

# DIVIDEND



34,000 Members appreciate the way we look after their interests and more are joining every day. By shopping at the CO-OP you can save time, money and trouble, for here are all the advantages of a big departmental store in the centre of your own city.

READ THESE FIGURES.  
DIVIDEND Returned to Members during the past twelve months:

£75,954 : 17 : 8

An average of £2 : 4 : 8 for each Member.  
Share Capital . . . . . £408,018  
Reserves . . . . . £27,865 : 17 : 3  
Members averaged . . . . . 34,065  
Convincing proof of the value you get at the CO-OP.

## SHOP AT THE CO-OP IT PAYS

COVENTRY & DISTRICT CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, LTD., WEST ORCHARD, COVENTRY.

as novelties, as machines, and as pleasurable occupiers of time. Bowden and Offer put forward the view that the opportunity to innovate and create a spiral of rising stimulation is therefore also an explanatory factor.<sup>28</sup> This correlates closely with the findings of this research that products bought by men in 1930s Coventry did completely new things, whereas products helpful to women only did existing jobs better. Nevertheless, it is important to state that women did <sup>not</sup> necessarily lose out entirely through men's purchase of such compelling products: there is ample evidence that they derived plenty of enjoyment from cameras, radios, gramophones and cars too.

Although the snapshot provided by the IRA bomb in 1939 showed that the central streets of the city remained a substantially male environment, it was not true to say that women ensconced in their new suburban homes were abandoning the streets - the 'traditional' locus for women's sociability.<sup>29</sup> Rather they were developing a new sort of instrumental usage. It was clearly not this group of women that John Stevenson was thinking of when he wrote that

For the more affluent the continuing availability of domestic service, boarding school education for the children, and servants or local delivery vans to look after the drudgery of day-to-day shopping often left plenty of free time. The city-centre department stores, hairdressers, cafes and coffee shops thrived on a custom made up of women 'going to town' for a day's shopping.<sup>30</sup>

And yet some elements of this description do fit their experience. A new shopping culture was evolving that had much less to do with the urgent satisfying of needs, and much more to do with the cultivation of new wants. It was more expansive and involved more leisurely trips that may not have culminated in a purchase at all. We have only to compare the kinds of furtive, hurried and joyless shopping experiences of a decade or

two decades before described by Roberts, Pember Reeves et al, with this account taken from the 'Coventry Sociological Survey' to see that momentous changes were taking place: 'There are such a lot of people at the shops - always seem to be crowds of women doing their shopping and talking, with babies in prams. They hang about and make a day of it'.<sup>21</sup>

This is not to suggest that shopping had become a wholly enjoyable experience. As Mary Grieve identified, a different sort of anxiety had arisen to replace that caused by outright poverty: choice creates its own tensions. Ruth Schwartz Cowan's oft-quoted comments on the power of domestic ideology - 'Laundering had once been just laundering; now it was an expression of love ... Feeding the family had once been just feeding the family; now it was a way to communicate deep-seated emotions' - might equally have referred to the increasing pressure on women to make the 'right' consumer choices to ensure the safe and happy personal development of other family members.<sup>22</sup> To fail as a shopper was to fail as a wife and mother. Negotiating the competing claims of different manufacturers added significantly to women's domestic workloads and made product selection a more economically and symbolically loaded task.

Patriarchy, the role of 'provider', and supposed mechanical competence all appear to have contributed to men's superior ability to seize the consumer opportunities available in Coventry. 'Undoubtedly', as Vickery said of her eighteenth-century Lancashire gentlefolk, 'men considered themselves skilful purchasers of certain kinds of commodities'.<sup>23</sup> Or, as this research makes clear, it wasn't that within certain categories of product men thought themselves skilful shoppers; rather the very nature of those categories of product determined the need for skilful (male) shopping. With reference to industrial practices in the 1930s, there is every reason to believe that men's conception of themselves as skilled shoppers grew in the same measure as their stature as skilled workers

declined.

When men deferred to women in a shared shopping process - for furniture for example - it was usually because 'she spends more time there', not because of any recognition of a complimentary set of skills. The skill attributed to women was managing money, not buying things. This allocation of roles was markedly different to that conceptualised by the author in the early stages of research.

A substantial amount of research now exists which shows that the kind of domestic tasks men have typically taken on in the post-Second World War period are infrequent, outdoor, dirty or involve powerful tools. There is therefore a strong parallel between men's housework, which is more visible than women's, and their shopping, which is similarly so. Research also shows that although men have taken on fewer housework responsibilities overall, they have shown a willingness to do more shopping. Jonathan Gershuny has calculated a doubling of time spent on shopping in Britain over the past thirty years, and suggests there is evidence that men are responsible for some of this increase.<sup>34</sup> This would explain the apparently conflicting perceptions of two Coventry women that the Thirties were a) a time when there was opportunity to go shopping with your husband, and b) that it wasn't like it is now, with men joining women in the supermarket. The changes over time appear not to mark working-class men's entry into the shopping arena, but an expansion in their shopping habits to encompass some of the routine, as well as the exceptional, purchases.

Judy Wajcman notes the view expressed by some feminists that male involvement in weapons development arises out of a need for 'a substitute for the babies they cannot conceive'.<sup>35</sup> Whilst this seems rather extreme, it is certainly the case that historically, cultural norms of masculinity have been inflected by the arenas in which men's creative endeavour was

deemed appropriate. In the 1930s in Coventry there appears to have been a convergence of interest between working-class men and women in the environment of the home and the framework of the family - even if this shared interest in domestic creativity was still played out in gendered ways. This supports Joanna Bourke's contention that 'the home was also a masculine space'.<sup>36</sup> It also prefigures Ferdynand Zweig's 1961 statement that the affluent worker's home 'becomes his baby which he nurses'.<sup>37</sup>

Men continued to exert a pervasive influence over spending decisions. Mr L vetoed house purchase; Mr W vetoed perms; Mr Y vetoed saving in favour of holidays; slightly out of the period Mr R vetoed carpet in favour of television. And it was always, always men who brought home the radios. Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that women were powerless in the domestic arena. Mrs L circumvented her husband's disapproval of working wives by keeping her job secret until a propitious moment for disclosure arose, they did eventually buy a house; Mrs R still got her carpet, Mrs W got a vacuum cleaner ahead of the people for whom she cleaned; Mrs Ru moved her family back to Coventry despite the prospects offered by her husband's new job. In many more instances, husband and wife were of one accord.

If we look beyond the bleak greyness of the depressed areas, there is another dimension to this period: we are struck by the 'thingness' of the age. Clearly every age is to some extent an age of things (for different social groups), but for the 1930s, the impression of an assault on the senses, of a barrage of newly available delights, is an acute one. Robert Graves and Alan Hodge's Long Weekend reads like a Victorian Things for the inter-war period.<sup>38</sup> It was this 'thingness' that Priestley captured so brilliantly. He describes

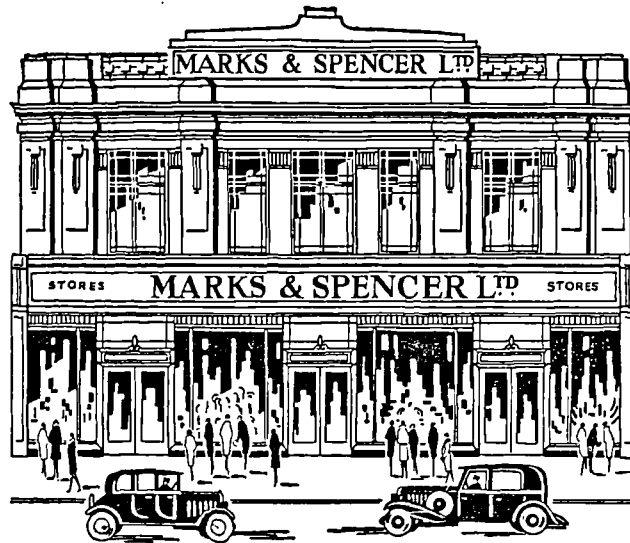
the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas

and dance halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor-coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and dirt tracks, swimming pools, and everything given away for cigarette coupons.<sup>39</sup>

Much of women's new purchasing power was doubtless directed towards smaller things like the 'crockerly, glass, cutlery, cooking utensils, haberdashery, cosmetics, stationery, books, toys and ironmongery' which Branson and Heinemann typify as Woolworth's stock in trade, but which the advertisement opposite reminds us was also Marks and Spencer's.<sup>40</sup> One could as well mention brassieres, eye-glasses, false teeth and sandals.

In Coventry 'thingness' was signified by socialists advocating electric stoves for all; factory girls having matching dresses made and being awarded watches; mothers cannily collecting packet tops before offers were announced; shopworking trade unionists raffling underwear at socials; churchmen railing at materialism while churchgoers bought typewriters, radios, sewing machines, bookcases and 'Compactum' wardrobes for departing parish workers; a youthful Bishop using yo-yos in an analogy three years before the yo-yo craze was announced; and the Mayor providing HMS Coventry with a radio-gramophone and records as well as a silk ensign.<sup>41</sup>

Orwell's jibe at the 'cheap luxuries which mitigate the surface of life' is quite misplaced here.<sup>42</sup> The Coventry men and women whose experience of the Thirties is represented in this thesis, enjoyed a substantial material improvement in the texture and quality of their lives; prosperous not in any absolutist sense, but enjoying greater prosperity than they had known before. It probably needed the intervention of the Second World War, and the experiences of austerity and privation that went with it, to boost women's consuming appetites into the same stratosphere as their menfolk's. In this respect the 1930s appear to represent a



NOTHING  
OVER

**5/-**

Ladies' & Children's Drapery. Men's & Boys' Wear, Hosiery  
Millinery, Boots, Shoes & Slippers, Gramophone Records,  
Confectionery, China, Glass, Watches & Clocks, Toys  
& Games, Fancy Goods, Toilet Necessities, Enamel Ware,  
Household & Kitchen Utensils.

**DIRECT FROM MANUFACTURER TO THE PUBLIC**  
Over 90% of our Goods are of British Manufacture

**MARKS & SPENCER LTD.**  
**12-13 Smithford St.**  
**Coventry**

**OVER 140 BRANCHES THROUGHOUT THE COUNTRY**

A reminder that Marks and Spencer's stock in trade was much closer to that of F.W. Woolworth's in this period than we are now accustomed to. From the 1931 Coventry Hospital Carnival 'Official Programme'.

watershed period; one with acute differential access to goods within a single class, where income for some stood well ahead of maintenance requirements and where apportionment of the surplus was being ineffectively stimulated. J.K. Galbraith observed that 'Few people at the beginning of the nineteenth century needed an ad-man to tell them what they wanted', and one could with equal truth substitute twentieth for nineteenth, but by the 1930s this group of people were beginning to need the intervention of the ad-man.<sup>43</sup>

Regionality and a longer historical view have proved very revealing in this study of a single city. The local pattern of housing supply, for instance, was quite distinctive: whereas a third of Plymouth's houses were between eighty and a hundred years old in 1943, only a quarter of Coventry's were up to fifty years old and around three fifths were no more than nineteen years old.<sup>44</sup> The under-representation of a property-owning middle class within the city gave a fillip to local owner-occupation. The city's craft-based manufacturing profile influenced the kinds of houses that were built before the First World War, so the city escaped Birmingham's legacy of back-to-backs. The same profile, with its emphasis on individual responsibility and job satisfaction, gave Coventry men's pretension to skilled status a legitimacy and longevity that it lacked in other industrial locations by this date.

There are some grounds for supposing that, *within certain limits*, Coventry exhibited a more tolerant and equitable attitude towards gender stereotyping than other places. It was in Coventry in 1970 that a man challenged the National Insurance Act by claiming to be a housewife and therefore entitled to the dependent wife's benefit.<sup>45</sup> In the 1930s it was certainly a place where the local 'hero' was a strong, female, historic figure who commanded a great deal of popular admiration, and where carworkers celebrated not only Godiva's achievement, but those of other



leading historic women.<sup>46</sup> The respondent reported by Kuper definitely believed in a distinctive Coventry 'way of doing things'.<sup>47</sup> Lastly, there is the evidence of male pram-pushing: an activity universally stigmatised according to many historical and sociological accounts. This research revealed both photographic and anecdotal evidence of men (and a boy) pushing prams, and of one man saddened that a leg injury prevented him from doing the same. It is tempting to conclude that the coachwork deployed in pram production made them objects of admiration and/or engagement in a way that wouldn't have been duplicated elsewhere.

On the other hand, different features of Coventry's longer term economic profile may have worked counter to its development as a 'consumption capital'. Coventry's favourable position in relation to the country's deeply felt (1930s) economic crisis, may not have been enough to challenge perceptions of the city formed during the 1920s when it suffered *more acutely* than many places during the slump which followed the First World War. There may even have been lingering recollections of distress from further back still: the 'starving ribbon weavers' of the 1860s. The city's prosperity may have appeared fragile or cyclical to potential investors, or the under-representation of the middle classes may have had the effect of obscuring the existence of a pool of potential consumers at a time when purchasing patterns were usually, although not invariably, believed to be emulative (see illustrations).

In terms of tertiary provision, however, it is difficult to recognise the 'cultural wasteland' identified by many post-war commentators in the preceding description. It was certainly true, however, that the thousands of additional migrants who flooded into the city at the very end of the period to work in the shadow factories exposed a shortfall in facilities. This, in turn, has led historians of Coventry such as Richardson, Lancaster and Mason, and Tiratsoo to assume a greater degree of *consciousness* of

# spender of millions . . . or saver of pennies

The woman who lives in the big house may set the fashion for other women in most things. But when it comes to cleaners, she has learned *this* from millions of women in simple homes — that the finest cleaner money can buy is also the most economical. It is the Hoover — which any woman can own for as little as **£1 down**



Ask for our representative to demonstrate the Hoover on your own carpets, or send the coupon below for a booklet giving full particulars of the various models, and the down-payment plan. Prices range from £4.19.6 for the Hoover Dustette, a small hand cleaner for upholstery, furnishings, etc.

DON'T TAKE UP THOSE CARPETS THIS SPRING CLEANING.  
LET THE HOOVER BEAT THEM WHERE THEY ARE!

## The HOOVER

It HEATS — it Sweeps — it Cleans — it Cleans

COUPON

**TUCK & BLAKEMORE, LTD.**  
**COVENTRY**

Please send, without obligation to me, free Hoover booklet.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_

Newspaper publishers advertising themselves in Cecil Chisholm's Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom and Census of Purchasing Power Distribution (3rd Ed, 1937/38), consistently stress the emulative value of selling to *their* audience. However, Tuck & Blakemore's clever advertisement for Hoover from the Midland Daily Telegraph of 19 May 1933, inverts the conventional wisdom, appearing to put women in simple homes in the 'driving seat'.



One of the world's greatest advertising agencies believes in selling the people "other people" copy. In short, it endorses —and continually proves—the sales power of emulation. On a percentage basis, the "people at the top" may seem small, but in buying capacity and emulation influence they merit an entirely effective coverage. They shun forceful sales methods, but can be impregnably "sold" by the use of

## ILLUSTRATED NEWSPAPERS

THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS • THE TATLER • THE SKETCH  
THE SPHERE • THE BYSTANDER • SPORTING AND DRAMATIC



THE ILLUSTRATED LONDON NEWS WILL TAKE YOUR  
MESSAGE TO THE UTTERMOST ENDS OF THE EARTH

See over.

lack than seems likely to have been the case. Pre-war Coventry was remembered as having '*lots of little shops*' (my italics), in contradistinction to the very real deficiency which was subsequently quantified. The wartime Advisory Panel on City Centre Redevelopment reckoned Bristol to be 'overshopped' in terms of retail provision, and noted that people from Swansea's large geographical hinterland 'manage[d] to find their way into town at regular intervals, involving a well defined routine of shopping, pictures or football, and tea, incidentally leaving plenty of money behind'.<sup>49</sup> Coventry, by comparison, had no such well defined routine, was 'not much of a shopping centre' and had 'no great influx of shoppers from the surrounding countryside'.<sup>49</sup>

Coventry's own peculiar characteristics undoubtedly influenced the form that retail development and shopping practices took within the city. In addition to the instances already discussed, one could point to the enhanced significance of mail order catalogues in a town without a department store, or the incentive for a continuance and development of delivery services where suburban growth was both rapid and intensive. A case could even be made that the city's population was in part composed of somewhat exceptional individuals. Although migration in pursuit of work was a mainstay of working people's lives over many centuries as Michael Anderson has made clear, it remains true that much pre-twentieth century migration took place over relatively short distances.<sup>50</sup> Robert Roberts and others have described the factors which combined to render poorer communities immobile; the holding of a recognised status in the local pub for him, and a credit rating at the local store for her.<sup>51</sup> These things exerted a powerful influence to bind families to a locality when a move of only a few streets might render them invisible. Richard Crossman noted that in the 1930s unemployed men 'rotted' only fifty miles away from new employment opportunities. 'Most of the unemployed', he said, 'stayed

put and waited for the work to come back to the distressed areas ... The minority, ready to seek their fortune in Coventry, or in similar light engineering round London, were those who possessed an extra bit of initiative'.<sup>52</sup> This view found an echo in the wartime APCC notes on Coventry, which recorded that 'A surprisingly high proportion of all income groups were immigrants ... It was suggested that this had resulted in a general alertness and enterprise among its citizens'.<sup>53</sup> Women migrants are equally if not more implicated in this exceptionality, as typical survival strategies for home and family were dependant on the availability of networks of neighbours and close kin.

It would nevertheless be surprising if some of the behaviour which has been described was not happening in pockets elsewhere: we should <sup>not</sup> have to look too far to find counterparts to the Middletown children who would <sup>not</sup> go to school unless they had the 'right' clothes.<sup>54</sup> Future research on different locations will reveal a more nuanced picture of changes in shopping patterns and practices.

Oral history testament proved an invaluable means of contextualising other sources. However, the conventional designation of women's shopping skills as innate, and the activity itself as mundane, meant that it proved especially challenging to elicit really insightful accounts of respondents' more conflicted feelings about this role. Many of the most revealing statements were *indirect* responses to the questions being posed. There was also a problem of 'slippage' in the meaning of key words over historical time. Because cheap has the contradictory meanings of both good value *and* poor quality, with the emphasis nowadays on the first of these meanings, discussions of people's predilection for bargain-hunting were especially prone to misunderstandings. A longer interviewing schedule, would do much to mitigate these problems.

This work has underlined the need to treat with caution some of the

generalisations that are prevalent in histories of retailing. The 'take it or leave it' attitude of sales assistants in Coventry described by one respondent, throws into question the prevalence of high ideals of 'service' commonly associated with the period. The emphasis on new shopping forms such as the department store needs to be redressed in favour of older forms such as the fair and the market. Central discoveries of this research were that the shopper was not necessarily a woman; the acquisition of things did not necessarily involve shopping; and 'shopping' did not necessarily involve the acquisition of things. This thesis constitutes a strong challenge to Vickery's expressed view that in order to gain a better understanding of people's relationship to the world of goods, we need to 'move beyond the moment of purchase - a mere snapshot in the long life of a commodity'.<sup>55</sup> The extraordinarily complex processes of shopping will repay the close attention of historians for some time to come.

Bill Lancaster and Tony Mason close their Coventry anthology with an excerpt from the 1945 Ministry of Information film A City Reborn which deals with the post-war reconstruction of Coventry. I want to do the same thing, but in doing so I want to draw attention to an ideologically loaded, and presumably unintentional textual transposition. In Lancaster and Mason's version the closing lines are as follows:

Soldier to girlfriend. "We'll soon be together in our own home with a nice little garage".

Girlfriend. "And a nice little nursery".<sup>56</sup>

However, this is what the script held by the Public Record Office at the reference they give, actually says:

She. "And we'll have a car, won't we? And a nice little garage?"

He. "And a nice little nursery".

She. "You and your nursery!".<sup>57</sup>

## ***Footnotes***

1. Priestley, English Journey 1934. (1968), p.68.
2. Coventry City Council, The City of Coventry: Official Handbook of the Coventry City Council (ND, 1927), p.45.
3. H. James, English Hours (1981), cited in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour (Coventry, ND, 1986?), p.342); and PRO HLG/88/9 APCC9 'Notes preliminary to a visit to Coventry', p.1.
4. Taylor, Seide Maises (1994), p.19 and p.20.
5. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ru.
6. See Walsh, Not Like This (1953), p.7, p.92 and p.128.
7. The progress of the Bishop of Coventry's New Churches Scheme was covered in The Times on 28 Sept. 1931, 19 Jul. 1934, 13 Dec. 1934, 13 Mar. 1936, 13 July 1936, 19 Dec. 1936, 12 May 1938, 26 May 1938, 21 July 1939 and 17 Oct. 1939. Information on dance schools is taken from P.J. Ltd's Coventry Directories.
8. MRC MSS. 117/1/1 Minutes of Coventry Branch Committee held 31 Oct. 1927.
9. Crump discusses the changing pattern of cinema ownership in Coventry in his chapter on recreation in Lancaster and Mason Life and Labour, see pp.266-67. The promotion, reconfiguration and competition between chains can also be followed through advertisements placed in the Alfred Herbert 'News' in 1934.
10. References to the Coventry Hippodrome Orchestra in the Radio Times (various, 1930s); regional visitors to the Hippodrome noted in PRO HLG/88/9 APCC Meeting, 7 Jul. 1943, (alterations and amendments to APCC 9), p.3; Coventry RFC's successes mentioned in Paul Sent From Coventry, p.66; E.B. Newbold, Portrait of Coventry (1972) p97.
11. All quotations in this paragraph are taken from M. O'Connor and P. O'Connor, Coventry City Footballers, 1908-1993: The complete who's who

(Middlesex, 1993), p.12. A player's profile of Bourton also appears on pp.62-63.

12. PRO HLG/88/9 APCC9 p.3.

13. Flower Show, Garden and Allotment sections were announced in the 1936 competition mentioned in the GEC Loudspeaker (April, 1936). In addition, evidence of a 'horticultural turn' may be identified from gardening advice in the Alfred Herbert News, and school inspection reports (for example CRO CCE/SCH/75/5/1-5 and CRO CCE/SCH/97/1).

14. The visit of the sculptor to inspect the site was described in The Times for 21 Jun. 1939. An example of Bassett-Green's planning applications for shops and houses may be found in the minutes of the city's Town Planning and Building Committee for 18 Oct. 1933 (plan 14877).

15. Information on Orr, Philpot and Turner taken from Crump's essay in Lancaster and Mason Life and Labour, pp 266-67.

16. Priestley, English Journey 1934. (1968), p.74.

17. C. Campbell, 'Understanding traditional and modern patterns of consumption in eighteenth-century England: a character action approach', in J. Brewer and R. Porter (eds), Consumption and the World of Goods, pp.40-57.

18. C. Hall, 'Married women at home in the 1920s and 1930s', Oral History, vol. 5 no. 2 (1977), pp.67-68.

19. M. Glucksmann, Women Assemble (1990), p.227.

20. C. Merz, After the Vote, p.14.

21. Quoted in Merz, After the Vote, p.16.

22. A. Vickery, 'Women and the world of goods', in Brewer and Porter (eds), Consumption and the World of Goods, p.281.

23. Light, Forever England, p.141.

24. D. Davis, History of Shopping, p.298.

25. S. Bowden and A. Offer, 'Household appliances and the use of time', Economic History Review, XLVII, 4 (1994), pp.725-48.



26. Ibid p.732 and p.740.
27. Ibid p.735 and p.741. J. Wajcman, Feminism Confronts Technology (1991), p.145.
28. S. Bowden and A. Offer, 'Household appliances', Econ. Hist. Rev., XLVII, 4 (1994), p.741.
29. See Midland Daily Telegraph, Friday 25 Aug. 1939 and The Times, 26 Aug. 1939. Four out of the five killed in Broadgate were men, as were the majority of the injured.
30. J. Stevenson, British Society 1914-45 (1984), p.400.
31. Findings reported by Kuper in Kuper (ed), Living in Towns, p.128.
32. R. Schwarz Cowan quoted in Glucksman, Women Assemble, pp.238-39.
33. A. Vickery, 'Women and the world of goods', in Brewer and Porter (eds), Consumption and the World of Goods, p.281.
34. J. Gershuny's findings are reported in C. Campbell, 'The Sociology of Consumption', in D. Miller (ed), Acknowledging Consumption (1995), p.105 and p.120; and in P. Bereano et al, 'Kitchen Technology and the Liberation of Women from Housework', in W. Faulkner and E. Arnold (eds), Smothered by Invention (1985), p.169 and p.269.
35. J. Wajcman, Feminism Confronts Technology, p.138.
36. Bourke, Working-Class Cultures, p.81.
37. F. Zweig, The Worker In an Affluent Society (1961), p.128.
38. R. Graves and A. Hodge, The Long Weekend 1940. (1991); A. Briggs, Victorian Things (Harmondsworth, 1990).
39. Priestley, English Journey, p.401.
40. Transcript of interview with Mrs Ro; Bishop Haigh's analogy was reported in The Times, 3 Dec. 1932; the yo-yo craze was mentioned on 21 Aug. 1934. The Mayor's presentation of items to HMS Coventry was reported in The Times, 5 Apr. 1938.
41. Branson and Heinemann, Britain in the Nineteen Thirties, p.259.

42. G. Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier (Harmondsworth, 1972), pp.80-81; cited in J. Stevenson, Social Conditions in Britain Between the Wars, p.24.
43. J.K. Galbraith, The Affluent Society 1958. (Harmondsworth, 1962), p.14.
44. PRO HLG/88/9 APCC 26 'Notes preliminary to a visit to Plymouth' mentions the age of the city's housing. Figures for Coventry's housing based on K. Richardson, Twentieth-Century Coventry Table 2.4, p.61 and C. Chisholm (ed), Marketing Survey of the United Kingdom (3rd ed, 1938), p.161.
45. See Oakley, Housewife pp.1-2. The man's name was Albert Mills. He and his wife, Vera, lost their case.
46. In 'Cars, Coventry and Lady Godiva', (Alfred Herbert 'News', Sept./Oct. 1936), the legend is described as 'one of the city's cherished sources of pride', and the motor car is claimed to have 'helped materially to keep the story alive' by reason of its close association with the city. In the pageant that year the following famous women were depicted as follows: Princess Elizabeth (Armstrong Siddeley), Marie Antoinette (Standard), Queen Elizabeth (Daimler), Joan of Arc (Morris Engines), Pocohontas (Sterling Metals), Nell Gwyn (Coventry Gauge and Tool), Boadicea (British Piston Ring Co.) and the Queen of Sheba (Renold and Coventry Chain Co. Ltd.).
47. Kuper, 'Blueprint for living together' in Kuper (ed), Living in Towns p.36.
48. See PRO HLG/88/9 APCC20 (Bristol), p.2; and APCC16 (Swansea), p.8.
49. PRO HLG/88/9 APCC9 'Notes preliminary to a visit to Coventry', p.1 and Ministry of Town and Country Planning, Minutes No. 3, APCC meeting 7 Jul. 1943 (additions and alterations to APCC 9), p.3.
50. Michael Anderson, 'What is new about the modern family', British Society for Population Studies conference, 'The Family', 14-16 Feb. 1983 (OU Papers No. 31), p.3.
51. Roberts, Classic Slum, p.29.

52. Crossman in Hodgkinson, Sent to Coventry, pp.xii-xiii.
53. PRO HLG/88/9 APCC 11 'Notes on employment and labour conditions at Coventry' (9-7-43), p.1.
54. R.S. and H.M. Lynd, Middletown (1929), pp.163-64.
55. A. Vickery, 'Women and the world of goods', in Brewer and Porter (eds), Consumption and the World of Goods, p.281.
56. Lancaster and Mason 'Society and Politics in Twentieth Century Coventry', in Lancaster and Mason (eds), Life and Labour, p.366.
57. PRO Inf/6/616.

## Appendix One

*How some typical families spend their leisure.*

	WINTER	SUMMER
<b>Man, aged 30. Labourer earning 56s. 2 children 5 and 3</b>		
Monday	After tea take children to wife's mother. Then take wife to pictures, spending 2s. 2d. on pictures and bus fares.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	Spend evening at home with wife doing odd jobs and listening to wireless.	Spend a number of hours on allotment and garden.
Wednesday	In the evening visit the Working Men's Club for 2 hours. Spend 2s. on beer.	Same as in winter.
Thursday	Spend evening at home with wife doing odd jobs and listening to wireless.	Spend a number of hours on allotment and garden.
Friday	Ditto	Ditto
Saturday	Spend afternoon at football match. Take wife shopping at night. Both have a drink, costing 1s.	No football match, otherwise same as in winter.
Sunday	Stay in bed until dinner time. Take wife's place in afternoon while she has a nap. Spend evening at home.	Same as in winter, except go to allotment for vegetables for dinner.
<b>Wife, aged 28.</b>		
Monday	General housework. Go to pictures with husband in the evening.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	General housework. At home with children in the evening.	Walk if fine with children.
Wednesday	General housework. At home with children in the evening.	Ditto.
Thursday	General housework. Visit relatives.	Same as in winter.
Friday	Home all day.	Ditto
Saturday	Go shopping in the evening with husband.	Ditto
Sunday	Church in the morning. Have a nap in the afternoon. Spend evening at home.	Ditto
<b>Man, aged 44. Machine attendant earning 71s. No children.</b>		
Monday	Read daily papers. Study English.	Read daily papers. Spend a lot of time in the garden.
Tuesday	Attend a St John Ambulance course.	Play bowls. Call at a Working Men's Club.

Wednesday	Attend Trades Council meeting.	Usually have a meeting of Sub-Committee of Trades & Labour Council or labour Party.
Thursday	Attend Labour Party meeting.	Attend Industrial Co-operative Society meeting. Call for a drink at a Working Men's Club on way home.
Friday	Read and do odd jobs in the house.	Read and potter about in the garden.
Saturday	Go to the pictures or Empire. Finish the evening at a Working Men's Club.	Go to the pictures and working Men's Club.
Sunday	Read. Call at a club in the dinner time. Find a club giving a concert in the evening.	Go for a fairly long walk, and finish the evening in Working Men's Club.

**Wife, aged 40.**

Monday	6am to 12 (noon) usual household duties. In the afternoon and evening read, knit, sew and listen to the wireless.	5am to 12 (noon) household duties. In the afternoon and evening read and attend to garden.
Tuesday	Usual duties. Visit mother, go shopping. In the afternoon and evening rest, read, knit, listen to wireless.	Usual household duties. Visit mother, go shopping, rest and knit.
Wednesday	Household duties. Visit mother. Rest, read, and attend a Prayer Meeting in the evening.	Household duties. Visit mother. Attend to garden. Attend a Prayer Meeting in the evening.
Thursday	Household duties. Rest, read, sew, go shopping, and listen to wireless.	Household duties. Visit mother, go shopping. Rest, read, attend to garden.
Friday	Household duties. Visit mother, go shopping. Rest, read, knit.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	Household duties. Rest, read, listen to wireless.	Household duties. Attend to garden. In the evening go for a walk and visit mother.
Sunday	8.00 to 9.45 Household duties. 10.45-12.00 Attend Divine Service. 1.00-5.00 Read. 6.00-8.00 Attend Divine Service.	Same as in winter.

**Man, aged 47. Factory Worker earning 80s. Two girls, aged 10 years.**

Monday	Attend lecture. Assisted children with lessons.	Attend to greenhouse plants and garden.
Tuesday	Assisted children with lessons. Football club meeting.	Attend to greenhouse plants. Watch a cricket match. Perhaps attend a meeting.
Wednesday	Went to a peace meeting.	Take children for a walk. Attend to greenhouse plants. Sick Club meeting

Thursday	An hour's reading. Met children from gym., gave them supper and put them to bed.	once a month. Attend to greenhouse plants. Take children swimming.
Friday	Football Club Dance.	Attend to greenhouse plants. Take children swimming.
Saturday	Watched football match. Visited a sick friend and met the family in town.	Attend to greenhouse plants. Watch a cricket match. Take children and wife to town.
Sunday	Attend Quaker meeting. Distributed some peace leaflets. Went with family to Nativity play.	Attend Quaker meeting. Take family for a walk.
<b>Wife, aged 46.</b>		
Monday	Went to the Universal Club all afternoon and evening.	Go to the Universal Club all afternoon and evening.
Tuesday	Attended Adult School class. Household duties.	Same as in winter.
Wednesday	Household duties.	Ditto
Thursday	Assisted a friend to remove. Household duties. Went to Repertory Theatre in the evening.	Household duties. Go to Repertory Theatre in the evening.
Friday	Household duties. Took children into town in the evening.	Household duties. Visit friends.
Saturday	Household duties. Went with children to a wedding in the afternoon, and to town in the evening.	Household duties. Go with family to town.
Sunday	Household duties. Went with family to Nativity play.	Household duties. Go for a walk with family.
<b>Man, aged 50. Labourer earning 46s. Boys 18 and 16. Girl 11.</b>		
Monday	Work 8 am to 5.30 pm. Attend to hens before leaving for work and in the evening after work. One pint of beer 6d.	Work 8 am to 5.30 pm. Attend to hens and allotment.
Tuesday	Work 8 am to 5.30 pm. Attend to hens. Help wife in the home.	Ditto
Wednesday	Ditto	Ditto
Thursday	Ditto	Ditto
Friday	Ditto. Spend evening at Working Men's Club. Two pints of beer 1s.	Spend evening at Working Men's Club. two pints of beer 1s.
Saturday	Attend to hens. Work from 8 am to 12.00 (noon). Watch football match in the afternoon. Take wife to town in the evening.	Same as in winter, except that the afternoon is spent on allotment.
Sunday	Attend hens. Help wife in the	Spend the whole day <del>289</del>

	home. After tea, if fine, visit relations.	allotment and hen run. After tea, visit relations.
<b>Wife, aged 50.</b>		
Monday	Wash clothes.	Sames as in winter.
Tuesday	Dry clothes. Clean house.	Ditto.
Wednesday	Start ironing. Do housework.	Ditto
Thursday	Finish ironing. Housework.	Ditto
Friday	Clean house thoroughly.	Ditto
Saturday	In the morning clean up the house. Spend the afternoon shopping and the evening with husband in town.	Ditto
Sunday	Do housework. After tea, visit relations.	Ditto
<b>Man, aged 34. Factory Worker earning 75s. 1 child, aged 2.</b>		
Monday	Study music at home.	Play tennis or do gardening.
Tuesday	Attend choir practice.	Same as in winter.
Wednesday	Usually have friends for a game of cards or a sing-song.	Do gardening.
Thursday	Attend church choir practice.	Same as in winter.
Friday	Conduct a Male Voice Choir.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	Spend a quiet evening at home reading or playing cards.	Play tennis or do gardening.
Sunday	Sing in church choir.	Same as in winter.
<b>Wife, aged 28.</b>		
Monday	Do needlework. Give music lesson.	Give music lesson.
Tuesday	Attend a card party with friends.	Play tennis or do gardening.
Wednesday	Entertain friends.	Play tennis, do gardening or sew.
Thursday	Sew. Make all my own and daughter's clothes.	Do gardening and sew.
Friday	Usually busy with some household task, such as baking.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	Go to the theatre.	Go to the theatre.
Sunday	Spend evening at home, reading or entertaining friends.	Usually take daughter for a stroll.
<b>Man, aged 45. Factory Worker earning 75s. 4 children, aged 24, 22, 20, 18.</b>		
Monday	At work from 7.30 am to 5 pm. In the evening go to Repertory or Variety Theatre, usually spending about 3s.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	Work 7.30 am to 5.30 pm. After tea, study 4 hours.	Sames as in winter, but if fine go somewhere out in the country.
Wednesday	Work 7.30 am to 5.30 pm. Spend the evening at home.	Same as in winter.
Thursday	Work 7.30 am to 5.30 pm. After tea, 1 hour back at work.	Go for a walk.

	Spend the rest of the evening filling in football pool coupons.	
Friday	Work from 7.30 am to 5 pm. Spend the evening writing to friends.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	If not working, stay in bed until 10 am. Wash, shave, have dinner. Attend a football match. After tea, listen in to "In Town Tonight", Music Hall, News, Dance Music.	Get up about 6 am. Go out for the whole day with a fishing party. On return, have a hot bath and a good meal. Cost 2s 6d for share of car. 1s for bait. One drink, 6d.
Sunday	Stay in bed until noon. After dinner, read weekly papers, and discuss the news with the boys. Always spend Sunday evening at home, reading, and preparing for work.	Go for a walk after breakfast, and again after dinner. Read in the evening.
<b>Wife, aged 42.</b>		
Monday	Housework. Wash clothes.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	Housework. Dry clothes. Go to cinema in the evening.	Ditto
Wednesday	Housework. Iron the clothes. Read in the evening.	Ditto
Thursday	Housework. Spend the evening filling in football pool coupons.	Housework
Friday	Housework. Go shopping in the evening.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	Housework. After dinner, go out shopping, and after tea do some more shopping. Have one drink before going to bed.	Ditto
Sunday	Girls help me to prepare meals. After dinner rest until tea time. After tea visit friends and have a drink, costing 1s.	Ditto
<b>Man, aged 43. Factory Worker earning 75s. 1 boy, aged 14.</b>		
Monday	Listen to radio. Do any odd jobs wanted at home.	Spend 2 or 3 hours fishing, call and have a drink, and get home by 10 pm.
Tuesday	Attend meeting of York Amalgamation of Anglers at Bay Horse Hotel. Have a drink or two.	Attend Anglers' Delegate Meeting at Bay Horse Hotel arranging for trophy and charity matches. Have a drink or two.
Wednesday	Stay in, doing nothing in particular.	Wife and I go for a cycle ride. Call at village pub for an odd drink on the way home.
Thursday	I always go to the same public-house and have a friendly chat with landlord and	Usually have 2 or 3 hours' fishing; if not, go out on bicycle and watch others



	customers, and have a few drinks.	fishing.
Friday	Go to the Working Men's Club, have a game of dominoes, billiards or cards. Also have a drink or two.	As Secretary of Angling Club (W.M.C.) attend to receive subscriptions and to arrange for fishing matches.
Saturday	Do any odd jobs wanted either in the house or garden. Meet wife in town after shopping and call at one or two places to see friends and have a drink.	Every Saturday in summer take part in angling matches, either as official or competitor.
Sunday	Have a walk in the morning. Have a sleep in the afternoon. Take wife to Working Men's Club concert in the evening and have a drink or two.	Fish in club matches. Home about tea-time. Wife and I usually have a walk in the evening, and have a drink or two.
<b>Wife, aged 47.</b>		
Monday	Listen to radio.	Take son for cycle ride.
Tuesday	Go to the cinema.	Go for a walk with friends.
Wednesday	Stay in to do the ironing.	Go for a cycle ride with husband.
Thursday	Go to the Empire.	Go to the cinema.
Friday	Go shopping.	Same as in winter.
Saturday	Finish shopping. Meet husband and visit friends.	Finish shopping. Take son to place of amusement.
Sunday	Busy all morning. Rest in the afternoon. Go to Working Men's Club concert with husband in the evening.	Busy all morning. Rest in the afternoon. Go for a walk with husband in the evening.
<b>Man, aged 40.</b>		
<b>Labourer earning 45s.</b>		
<b>Boy, aged 8. Girl 6.</b>		
Monday	Work from 8 am to 6 pm. After tea take wife and children to the pictures. 9d, 4d, 4d.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	Work 8 am to 6 pm. Read in the evening. Wife and I have half-pint beer each, 6d.	Ditto
Wednesday	Work 8 am to 6 pm. Read in the evening. Half-pint of beer each, 6d.	Ditto
Thursday	Work 8 am to 6 pm. Read in the evening. Short of cigarettes. No beer as funds are low.	Same as in winter. If fine take a stroll by the river after tea.
Friday	Work 8 am to 6 pm. Visit Working Men's Club in evening. Pay football sweep 1s. 1 pint beer, 6d.	Same as in winter except if weather is warm work overtime.
Saturday	Work until noon. Watch football match and have 1 pint of beer in canteen. After tea take wife to visit mother. 3s spent on beer.	Work until noon. Take the children over the fields by the river. After tea, wife, mother, myself have a walk. Have 1 pint of beer each, 1s.
Sunday	Help wife get breakfast.	Same as in winter.

	Assist washing up. Clean up. Have nap after dinner. Take wife to Working Men's Club in the evening. Spend on an average 2s. on beer.	
<b>Wife, aged 38.</b>		
Monday	Wash and dress children for school. Start week's washing. If finished by teatime go to the pictures with husband.	Same as in winter.
Tuesday	Wash and dress children for school. Clean the house and get the washing dry.	Ditto
Wednesday	Wash and dress children for school. More cleaning. Iron part of the washing.	Ditto
Thursday	Wash and dress children for school. Finish ironing.	Ditto
Friday	Wash and dress children for school. Read in the evening.	Ditto
Saturday	Wash children. Make weekly payments to insurance man, coal man, clothier, laundry man. Pay shop bill. Get groceries in for week-end on credit. After dinner visit mother-in-law with husband.	Ditto
Sunday	Papers - "People" and "Reynolds News". Get meals ready. Get husband's clothes ready for morning. Go with husband to Working Men's Club in the evening.	Ditto

Reproduced from B. Seebohm Rowntree, Poverty and Progress: A Second Social Survey of York (1941), pp.429-445.

NB. Only the entries for husbands and wives are shown here.

## ***Appendix Two***

### ***Multiples represented in central Coventry by 1939, by street.***

This information is taken from P.J. Ltd., Street Directory for Coventry, 1939.

#### **Broadgate**

Montague Burton, tailors

Manfield & Sons Ltd., boot dealers

H. Samuel Ltd., jewellers

Maypole Dairy Co.

Alexandre, tailors

Boots Cash Chemists

Lyons Cafe

Sketchley Dye Works

#### **City Arcade**

A.L.Salisbury, fancy leather goods dealers

F.W. Woolworth & Co. Ltd., fancy goods dealers

J. & M. Stone, Lighting & Radio Ltd.

#### **Cross Cheaping**

A.D. Wimbush & Co., confectioners

W. Timpson Ltd., boot factors

Canadian Fur Co., Ltd., furriers

Freeman, Hardy & Willis Ltd., boot dealers

Milletts Stores Ltd., drapers & gents outfitters

England & Sons, boot dealers

Johnson Bros., Ltd., dyers and cleaners

Fifty Shilling Tailors

Donegal Tweed Co., Ltd., tailors

Owen Owen Ltd., drapers

Burges

Montague Burton, tailors

Smart Bros., house furnishers

Eight Hours Cleaners Ltd., dyers and cleaners

Empire Meat Co., Ltd.

Home & Colonial Tea Stores Ltd.

Hertford Street

Dunn & Co., Ltd., hatters

Austin Reed, Ltd., gentlemen's outfitters

Elizabeth the Chef, confectioners

Sixty Minute Cleaners., dyers and cleaners

Remington Typewriter Co., Ltd.

Provident Clothing & Supply Co., Ltd., outfitters

W.H. Smith & Son, Ltd., booksellers

Midland & Hackney Furnishing Co., Ltd., house furnishers

James Walker Ltd., jewellers

Hoover Ltd., electrical sweepers

Smithford Street

W. Barratt & Co., Ltd., boot & shoe dealers

Stylo Boot Co.

Marks & Spencer, Ltd., fancy goods dealers

Fifty Shilling Tailors

Halford Cycle Co., Ltd.

Singer's Sewing Machine Co.

Curry's Ltd., cycle & radio dealers

Hiltons, boot & shoe dealers

British Home Stores, general & fancy goods dealers

J. Sainsbury Ltd., provision dealers

Dolcis Shoe Co.

Fleet Street

Jays Furnishing Stores

Manchester Warehouse Co., drapers

H. Moore (Confectioners) Ltd., bakers

## *Appendix Three*

*Humorous items with a shopping or related theme, reproduced from the Alfred Herbert 'News' and the GEC 'Loudspeaker'.*

*Have you heard these-*

A diligent worker approached the cashier one Friday evening and said that a mistake had been made - he had been given 10 shillings too much in his wages.

The cashier counted the contents of the envelope and replied that there was no mistake, the firm having given the man an increase.

"When did I get the rise?" asked the surprised man.

"Exactly three months ago."

"Well the old cat", cried the other. "She never said a word!"

GEC 'Loudspeaker', July 1936

*Laugh - and the world laughs with you.*

Harry: "Is your wife economising these days?"

Ted: "Yes, we do without practically everything I need".

GEC 'Loudspeaker', January 1936

Husband: "No, I can't let you have more money this week; I'm saving something for a rainy day".

Wife: "H'm, it seems to me you are saving up for a flood".

Alfred Herbert 'News', January/February 1932

*This year of grace*

' . . . Finally and in conclusion, do we not see just now the "Ladies' delight" in all the shop windows - "January Sales" printed in large letters everywhere, proclaiming the fact of yet another sale, as if they ever had anything else! ... We know all the time that ... "Sales" ... are bunkum.'

"Bystander"

Alfred Herbert 'News', January 1930

*Laugh - and the world laughs with you.*

He: "Why does a woman say she's been shopping when she hasn't bought a thing?"

She: "Why does a man say he's been fishing when he hasn't caught anything?"

GEC 'Loudspeaker', April 1936

*We wonder*

If Oliver has really adopted "Come into the garden Maud" as his signature tune. And why Friday night shopping activities now take precedence over all other activities.

GEC 'Loudspeaker', January 1936

*"Cyanide's" Problem Page*

[reply to "Alarmed"]

'You say the girl actually met you when you came from work, put her arms round your neck, kissed you, and told you she had been looking at some nice furniture ... The abandoned hussy - and to think she only met you the previous day! There is only one thing left for you to do - emigrate!'

Alfred Herbert 'News', July 1931\*

'I say!' exclaimed a customer in a druggist's shop, who thought he had been overcharged. 'Have you any sense of honour?'

'I'm sorry', said the druggist, from force of habit, 'I have not, but I have something just as good!'

Alfred Herbert 'News'. January/February 1932

'This is a very small portion. I had a much larger one yesterday'.

'Where did you sit sir?'

'By the window'.

'Oh, those are advertising portions'.

Alfred Herbert 'News'. March/April 1933

Distracted Mother: "Oh, dear, what shall I do with the baby?"

Young son: "Didn't we get a book of instructions with it, Mother?"

Alfred Herbert 'News', July 1930

*Believe it or not-*

That an Ex-Hoover representative asserts that he can earn 30/- per hour any day. But he prefers not to.

GEC 'Loudspeaker', April 1936

An Aberdeen woman walked into a shop the other day and bought an attaché case.

When asked by the assistant if she wanted the case wrapped up, she replied:

"Oh no, thank you. Just put the paper and string inside".

GEC 'Loudspeaker', January 1936

Have you heard these-

The two old women had never liked each other, even in the old days. They met one morning by accident whilst shopping.

"It must be five years since I saw you last", said Elsie. "How much older you look. I would hardly have recognised you".

"Yes", replied Nora, "it is certainly a long time. I don't think I would have known you, either, if I hadn't remembered your hat".

GEC 'Loudspeaker', July 1936

\* Contrast with:

*'Glances at life - No. 1' by the Onlooker*

[tells the tale of an old pal who has 'sold his soul' to his fiancée, and finishes with the plea -]

'Why cannot they live 50-50 whilst romance is still young?'

Alfred Herbert 'News', July 1930



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This Bibliography has been compiled using guidelines laid down by the Centre for Social History, with additional help from Judith Butcher, Copy-Editing: The Cambridge Handbook for Editors, Authors and Publishers (3rd ed, Cambridge, 1992); and guidelines produced by St Peter's House Library, University of Brighton.

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Ed/21/18110 Centaur Road School.

Ed/21/18111 Mile Lane (later Cheylesmore) School.

Ed/21/18112 Earlsdon No. 3 School.

Ed/21/18113 Edgewick School.

Ed/21/18115 Frederick Bird School.

Ed/21/18116 Holy Trinity School.

Ed/21/18117 Leicester Causeway (later John Gulson) School.

Ed/21/18124 Red Lane School.

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Ed/21/18126 St. Mark's School.

Ed/21/18128 St. Michael's School.

Ed/21/18129 St. Osburg's (Roman Catholic) School.

Ed/21/18130 St. Peter's School.

Ed/21/18132 South Street School.

Ed/21/18133 Spon Street School.

Ed/21/18138 Union Street School.

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Ed/21/41893 Binley Central School.

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Ed/21/41897 Cheylesmore School.

Ed/21/41898 (b) Moseley Avenue School.

Ed/21/41898 (c) Earlsdon School.

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