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Commercials, Careers and Culture: Travelling Salesmen in Britain, 1890s-1930s

As Church recently noted, there are gaps in our understanding of the connections between production and distribution.¹ The commercial traveller or sales representatives, who linked manufacturers and wholesalers to retailers, is one of the neglected figures. It might appear a peripheral and insecure occupation. Indeed McKibbin identifies 'petty clerks and salesmen, insurance agents and shop assistants' as occupying a 'socially marginal world' of low earnings, but middle-class aspirations, lifestyles and education. This is consistent with Crossick's early interpretation of the lower middle-class as lacking political influence or its own cultural identity due to occupational fragmentation and given the greater influence of employers, professionals and an emerging labour movement.² Even specialist studies have revealed little about commercial travellers' careers or earnings.³ Yet, the salary of Wills' travellers averaged £400 per annum around 1900 with the highest earners, who received £800 plus expenses, sporting frock coats and silk hats. Alford found that only senior managers were more highly paid.⁴ Hosgood argued that commercial travellers possessed a well-established and resilient 'culture of fraternity', which belied images of lower middle-class insecurity.⁵ While 'on the road', they stayed in commercial hotels where their sense of solidarity was expressed through rituals, resembling Masonic practices, and notions of an egalitarian 'brotherhood'. Travellers' associations reinforced such contacts as well as campaigning for cheaper hotel and railway rates and providing welfare services. Although familiar with shopkeepers through their work, Hosgood suggested that salesmen preferred to maintain their social distance. Arguably then high earnings and a powerful sense of identity equipped travellers to cope with the potential isolation inherent in their work.

The study of commercial travellers also extends the literature on the lower middle-class, which has concentrated on the experiences of artisans and independent retailers.⁶ After Crossick's initial emphasis on cultural weaknesses, writing in the 1990s, Crossick and Haupt identified a more resilient and distinctive petit-bourgeois culture in Europe. While the search for economic security remained central, this re-interpretation highlighted adaptability and the effectiveness of lower middle-class strategies for combating economic, social and political challenges. Particular emphasis was placed on the family and local community as the centres of lower middle-class culture.⁷ This article examines whether commercial travellers shared the lower middle-class resilience explored in Crossick and Haupt's later work and whether the Victorian self-confidence, identified by Hosgood, during the

interwar years. It focuses on sales representatives selling consumer products in Britain rather than those operating overseas or those engaged in 'industrial' marketing, which is the sale of goods to producers.⁸ The latter required greater specialist knowledge, though the distinction was blurred by the technical sophistication of consumer goods such as typewriters and sewing machines. The article considers whether commercial travellers remained a secure part of the lower middle-class in terms of income and career prospects. Travellers' perceptions of their own status are analysed to determine if they retained a self-confidence derived from their culture of fraternity.

I

Commercial travelling, unlike many artisan trades in the early twentieth century, was not in decline. The census of 1921 listed 94,604 commercial travellers; there were 138,426 in 1931 and 149,457 twenty years later.⁹ The ease of entry generated its own instability, evident in high rates of turnover. After the First World War a large floating population of ex-servicemen reportedly took up travelling in preference to returning to the routines of office work.¹⁰ George Orwell highlighted transience in his account of lodging with 'a succession of commercial travellers, newspaper canvassers and h-p touts'. He located travellers within a 'sinking middle-class' that he advised to recognise its proletarian fate.¹¹ JB Priestley characterised travellers as an amalgam of Ulysses, Don Quixote, Tom Jones and Mr Pickwick on the grounds that their lives combined drama, mobility and insecurity.¹² Yet he too implied declining status by identifying travellers with the industrial England of the nineteenth century rather than with the developing consumer society. Travellers acknowledged popular notions of their marginal status. Their professional associations were keen to distinguish their members, as 'legitimate' travellers, from any connection with dubious practices or door-to-door salesmen. The long-serving secretary of United Kingdom Commercial Travellers' Association claimed that 'anybody who has not a proper trade description, or is anxious to hide his real description, when he is dealing with the police, for instance, will describe himself as a traveller. In the same way as ladies of uncertain occupation are fond of describing themselves as actresses, so many people who are not commercial travellers describe themselves as travellers'.¹³ The National Union of Commercial Travellers (NUCT) complained to the Home Secretary that 'too frequently persons charged with various offences have falsely described themselves as commercial travellers'.¹⁴ Such concerns explain the support for licensing travellers, especially those from overseas, and for limits on schools of salesmanship, which

were believed to generate a surplus of poorly equipped new entrants.¹⁵ Nonetheless the Daily Express described commercial travelling as an 'overcrowded' occupation' in 1937.¹⁶ The next section considers whether travellers' anxieties reflected precarious or declining earnings.

II

It is difficult to generalise about travellers' earnings given the diversity of their individual trades and employment contracts. Self-employed travellers relied on commission. Others were employed by a manufacturer or wholesaler with their incomes based on a mix of salary, expenses and commission.¹⁷ The most common arrangement was salary and expenses plus commission above a specified turnover. In evidence to the Committee on Industry and Trade in 1926, George Mason, a leading figure in NUCT, reported that their members had an average net weekly income of £4 10s, around £230 per year. Frederick Coysh, representing the longer established UKCTA, estimated average gross income at between £300 and £400 per annum, though he believed some travellers earned as much as £2000. The higher figure partly reflects the use of gross income, but social differences between NUCT and UKCTA may have been a factor. Such evidence places travellers' incomes within the middle-class income bounds of £250 to £500 per year identified by interwar social surveys.¹⁸ But Mason claimed travellers' real earnings had declined since 1914 and Coysh reported gains during 1921-22 followed by a downturn.¹⁹ Further insight into earnings can be gleaned from the records of JP Coats, the leading cotton thread producer, and McVitie and Price, biscuit-makers.

Though a family firm, Coats pioneered large-scale distribution in Britain and developed into a profitable multinational enterprise.²⁰ It established 'modern' managerial systems, including detailed internal accounting systems, under the direction of OE Phillippi. Coats' domestic marketing used a combination of agents, commercial travellers and regional depots. Distribution was strategically important, providing the focal point for regulating prices and market shares as well as contributing to corporate amalgamations in the thread industry. In 1889 the Sewing Cotton Agency, later renamed the Central Agency, was established to handle overseas sales outside the US for Coats, Clark and Company and Jonas Brook. Seven years later Coats, Clark, Brook and Chadwick were amalgamated.²¹ The mills delivered thread to the Central Agency's warehouses where the goods were packed and then distributed to fill orders. Surviving records reveal the incomes of 144 commercial travellers who worked for Coats

in the home market between 1889 and 1929. The number employed annually ranged from 22 in 1893 to 66 in 1906 and includes travellers based in Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, and Newcastle. Founded in Edinburgh in 1830, McVitie and Price was one of a number of regional biscuit manufacturers that expanded rapidly after 1900 through promoting branded lines.²² Information is available for 137 travellers operating in sales territories across Scotland, northern England and Ireland between 1920 and 1937. Regular transfers between its Edinburgh, London and Manchester offices linked McVitie's wage setting to the wider labour market. Any small sample has inherent limitations. In particular, it is drawn from manufacturing whereas general wholesaling and retailing were the largest employers of travellers. However, the data should capture general trends. In constructing the database, annual incomes were based on 1 January with any subsequent changes being wholly assigned to the following year.

The database confirms that Victorian commercial travellers were far more affluent than manual workers: Coats' travellers averaged £241 in 1896 compared with £52 for manual workers.²³ They were less well paid than Wills salesmen in 1900.²⁴ Differentials had narrowed, however, by the 1920s: McVitie salaries were comparable to those of 13 Wills travellers based in London who earned between £225 and £525 per year.²⁵ Average salaries were £389 in 1925 and £402 in 1929 at Coats compared to £297 and £292 for McVitie's travellers.²⁶ All were above the £250 lower bound conventionally used for middle-class income, implying that travellers retained their middle-class economic status. Average incomes at Coats show very distinct phases. Earnings rose in twelve of the sixteen years from 1889 to 1905, then a new phase was apparent with 1905 earnings not surpassed until 1916. Average salaries rose dramatically from £285 in 1920 to £405 in 1922, before a decline in 1923 signalled a further period of modest gains to £402 by 1929. At McVitie and Price nominal incomes fell during the early 1920s, but losses had been recouped by 1924 with the rise continuing to 1928. Nominal incomes declined during 1929 to 1931, but rose thereafter.

Chart 1

In order to evaluate trends in real incomes, an index of average earnings of Coats' travellers were deflated using Feinstein's cost of living index.²⁷

Chart 2

The generally positive character of the 1890s and early 1900s is confirmed. But the trend rate of growth was negative: -0.6 per cent per annum from 1889 to 1929. Travellers, like clerical workers, were most prosperous during the 1890s and early 1900s.²⁸ Their nominal incomes were distinguished by stability, so that inflationary periods eroded their real value while deflation generated gains. Initially salaries were lowest in Manchester and highest in Birmingham and Liverpool, but the regional averages converged from 1906. Salaries in London and Glasgow were generally below average to 1919, partly because these larger offices included a higher proportion of junior staff. The Edwardian slowdown began earlier for real incomes than for nominal earnings and all regions experienced the steep wartime contraction. From 100 in 1913, the index of the Coats' travellers' real incomes had fallen to 71 in 1917 and to 50 by 1919. By contrast, Feinstein's index of real earnings for manual workers rose from 97 to 113 over the same period. The wartime loss of real earnings is overstated to the extent that their employers met some expenditure on food when travellers were 'on the road'. But their position deteriorated and even the improvements generated by substantial increases in money wages from 1919 to 1922 failed to restore travellers' pre-war position: by 1922 the index of real wages was 84. The estimates support Mason's assertion that real earnings fell after 1914 and fits with the crisis of the middle-class from 1918 to 1923 identified by McKibben.²⁹ The Coats index of real incomes was still only 93 by 1929. The salaries of travellers based in London, Leeds and Manchester increased most rapidly during the 1920s, those in Newcastle fared least well and progress stalled in Glasgow and Bristol in the late 1920s. These trends presumably reflected regional differences in sales and in the supply of white-collar labour. The average real income of McVitie's commercial travellers increased at a rate of 1.8 per cent per annum between 1924 and 1937 with checks only in 1925, 1929 and 1935. This evidence reinforces the conventional picture of real wage gains for those in work between the wars, but initially travellers were regaining lost ground.³⁰

The Coats' series shows the influence of cohort effects, career paths and corporate policies. The Central Agency initially acquired travellers already employed by one of the participating firms. The average age of staff in 1889 was 32; all had previous experience so were beyond early career salaries. This tendency was reinforced after the 1896 merger by the addition of travellers from Chadwick's. The 1890s cohort were long-serving, tending either to die in post or continuing to retirement. By the early twentieth century they received fewer annual increments, contributing to the levelling out of average income growth. The salaries of two long-serving employees were unchanged

after 1901 for 15 years and 18 years respectively. The post-1905 decline in average earnings in part reflected the recruitment of 22 travellers, primarily at lower salaries in London, Manchester, Leeds and Birmingham. Their salaries changed little over the pre-war period. It is difficult to assess whether this reflected depressed sales or was due to more effective control over prices and market shares.³¹

During the war, few of Coats' salesmen entered military service, in contrast to their clerks, and only three women became travellers. With demand for thread exceeding supply, salesmen were more often engaged in allocating scarce goods among eager buyers than promoting sales. Thus Coats had few incentives to raise travellers' earnings. War bonuses for clerical and managerial staff went to those on lower incomes in 1915.³² In 1916 increases of £12 to £30 were granted to 'various Home Travellers and Department Managers'; further awards were made in 1918. Again these payments went largely to lower paid travellers; few of those earning over £300 per annum received any increments during the war years. General salary rises resumed from January 1919 when the firm approved payments between £36 and £60 to home travellers. These exceptional salary increases in 1920 reflected the post-war boom plus the company's general efforts to address complaints about white-collar incomes.³³ The immediate surge of demand increased the importance of salesmen for maximising market share as well as in monitoring and enforcing Coats' price and discount policies. The latter aspect attracted considerable public scrutiny through official investigations into alleged profiteering on cotton thread. To the extent that sales increased and competition intensified, salesmen would have benefited, but it proved to be a 'one-off' adjustment. After 1922 the earlier pattern resumed: the highest earners received few increases and the salaries of new entrants progressed gradually.

Relationships between travellers and senior management were highly personal at McVitie where Sir Alexander Grant, the chairman, attached particular importance to sales.³⁴ One traveller recalled him being 'very fussy about the wearing apparel of his representatives'.³⁵ Grant and his senior sales manager in annual salary reviews used detailed reports of each traveller's sales. Salesmen received salary plus commission of 2.5 per cent on sales above an agreed target. No commission was paid to travellers who resigned or retired since 'this commission is in place of an increase in salary'.³⁶ Regional managers received salary plus commission on their own sales and commission on their section's overall sales.³⁷ Trends in average income mask variations between the earnings of entry-level commercial travellers and their senior managers. McVitie's travellers averaged around £290 per year between the wars. However, for almost the entire period, new travellers started on a salary of £150 per

year. Within three to six months their annual income usually increased to £200. At the other extreme, the leading earner received over £600 per year from 1927. The distribution of income among McVitie's travellers is shown in table 1.

Table 1

The income distribution confirms that a sizeable proportion of travellers earned less than the £250 lower boundary for middle-class income: 37 per cent of travellers earned less than £250 per year between 1925 and 1937. The majority of those who earned more were in the income bracket from £250 to £349. Commercial travelling offered predictable and reasonably high earnings with opportunities for advancement to upper middle-class levels of income. One traveller's salary increased from £200 in 1920 to £412 six years later; another's earnings rose from £300 to £550 between 1924 and 1937. For these salesmen, middle-class status was secure: McVitie's staff earned well above the average for male managers in the UK.³⁸ But the majority of travellers were confined to the lower middle-class in terms of income. Travellers claimed they were rarely promoted to higher paid 'inside' work since, if skilled, they were too valuable to take off the road.³⁹ The McVitie's data suggests that few travellers reached the occupation's pay ceiling.

The experiences of those entering at the lower end of the salary scale are captured in table 2 which traces the annual incomes of 20 travellers who joined McVitie's between 1922 and 1924, started on £150 or £200 per annum and remained with the firm for at least five years. This sample overstates incomes and career stability due to the lack of information on those who quit or were dismissed within a few months. Where salary data survives for such short-term employees, it suggests that their incomes rose little, implying that disenchantment prompted a quick change of company or career.

Table 2

Mr Ballantyne's earnings advanced spectacularly from £200 per year in 1922 to £325 by 1926 and £425 in 1930. His salary had reached £500 by 1937. At the opposite pole Mr Whyte, whose initial salary was £150 in October 1922, received a rise to £200 within a month and was awarded several small increases to £260 by 1930. Thereafter his salary was unchanged to 1937. Mr Ballantyne's upward mobility, even

if unusual, may have motivated others, but Mr Whyte's career appears more representative. If Mr Ballantyne's exceptional career is excluded, the average annual income of the ten new entrants who were still with the firm in 1937 was £306. The small sample in table 2 suggests that the typical experience was one of swift initial increases from starting salaries of £150 or £200, further more gradual advances during their fourth to seventh years of service and then few or no increases. This was sufficient to ensure a middle-class income, but Grant recognised that progression to these company salary limits eventually weakened the incentive effect of commissions. Although the chairman preferred to raise salaries only in line with increased sales, so as to reward achievement, he was concerned about the morale of staff that had received no advances for several years. This leads on to an examination of how the firm conceived and operated its salary and commission system.

III

Inter-war wage setting has been analysed extensively in debates about the operation of labour markets at times of high unemployment.⁴⁰ Rising real earnings after 1922 indicated that wages did not adjust quickly to price changes. Such wage 'stickiness' has been variously interpreted as a result of increased trade union bargaining power, lags in perceptions of price movements and the operation of 'insider' labour markets that limited the impact of 'outsiders', such as the unemployed, on wage setting. Bain explained the growth of white-collar unionism primarily in terms of favourable government actions, the greater recognition of unions by employers and the concentration of workers in larger firms, resulting in easier organisation and greater awareness of common interests.⁴¹ Among salesmen, though, support for unions remained weak. Indeed one anti-union commentator likened organising commercial travellers to making a 'rope from sand' due to their nomadic life and diverse interests.⁴² The established associations and 'culture of fraternity' demonstrated that such obstacles could be overcome, but also discouraged more radical tactics. Although some branches of UKCTA advocated trade union methods to improve travellers' status in the early 1920s, the annual conference repeatedly rejected such proposals.⁴³ National officials asserted that union principles were contrary to travellers' individualism and liable to damage their relationships with employers.⁴⁴

Wartime wage agreements and the Wages Boards were influential in many trades, but appear to have had little impact on salesmen's earnings. Agreements for shop-assistants, grocery staff and the

wholesale textile trades set minimum weekly rates for retail staff, clerks and warehouse staff, but foundered in the case of travellers. It proved difficult to determine their precise working hours and, therefore, to establish hourly or weekly pay rates.⁴⁵ The main union influence was the National Union of Commercial Travellers (NUCT), formed in 1921 and modelled on the National Union of Clerks. Its leadership depicted 'union methods' as consistent with professional status, citing examples of organisation among bank officials, teachers and lawyers.⁴⁶ They advocated union consciousness as a rational response to the emergence of large-scale organisations, which, they argued, were undermining travellers' special relationships with their employers.⁴⁷ NUCT demanded a minimum wage of £6 per week, established an unemployment fund and affiliated to the Trades Union Congress and the National Federation of Professional Workers. Its political connections were apparent in the appointment of Fred Montague, a Labour MP, as its general secretary in 1925. Yet NUCT's membership peaked at 742 in 1931, of whom only 94 contributed to its political fund.⁴⁸ The union contemplated renaming itself as an association in the hope of increasing recruitment and proposals for a merger with UKCTA failed in the mid-1930s.⁴⁹ Thus unionism was a minority pursuit among travellers who contributed little to lower middle-class radicalism between the wars. There was not the degree of competition from female workers that stimulated union activity among male bank clerks. Dissatisfactions over earnings and status were channelled through an associational culture that emphasised travellers' professional status and closeness to employers. Given such attitudes and no apparent shortage of labour, neither employers nor the state had any incentive to promote unionism among travellers. Employers used 'blacklisting' to reduce travellers' mobility, though in confectionery at least this practice had weakened by the late 1930s.⁵⁰

Thomas has explained inflexible wages in terms of insiders' advantages given employers' preference to minimise labour turnover.⁵¹ Travellers possessed knowledge and contacts that firms might prefer to retain rather than losing to competitors and incurring the costs of taking on unproven staff. Certainly pre-conceptions of salary levels operated at McVitie's. In 1934 Grant noted that 'Mr Hutcheon gets over £300 and I think when a man reaches this figure, he should get increases on his increased sales only. We will however talk about this when I get to Edinburgh next week. I am always willing to consider a man's salary when it is not too large, by which I mean under £300'.⁵² Bonuses and gifts were used to motivate and retain salesmen, resulting in a mix of standard procedures plus the chairman's personal influence.⁵³ An element of performance-related pay was designed to create

incentives for travellers to maximise their sales. For most of the interwar period commission was calculated on the amount of increased sales above a baseline figure. In effect McVitie's used commission as a means of calculating salary increases with any rise generally incorporated into future salary. Travellers were sometimes informed that they would receive no further increases until their sales had reached a specific monthly or annual target. But there was an inherent 'stickiness' since a traveller's total salary was never reduced. A poor year's sales resulted in no rise or even the threat of dismissal if performance failed to improve, but not the loss of previously awarded increases.⁵⁴ By 1933 accumulated deficits on targets under the formal scheme, reflecting depressed sales, led to reform. Alexander Grant noted that 'I am wanting to make a new start with the travellers and their salaries and wipe all the old losses out, so that, from the beginning of this year, men with salaries under £400 will get 2 1/2 % added to their salaries and men with £400 and over will get 1 1/4 % added'.⁵⁵ Grant considered making salaries more dependent on commission as a means of promoting greater effort, though only for new travellers so existing staff would have benefited as 'insiders'.⁵⁶ Two years later adjustments were made to a scheme based on a commission of 1% on total sales, replacing the higher rate on the net increase in sales.⁵⁷

Throughout management made adjustments in the light of depressed trading conditions or individual circumstances. In 1929 Grant wrote to Peter Anderson whose sales had fallen by £1000. Grant commented that 'conditions on your ground have been difficult' and, therefore, a rise of £20 had been awarded as 'a little mark of encouragement'.⁵⁸ A year later Anderson requested a further increase. As well as highlighting his six years service, he emphasised the problems of selling in his area given the closure of the local naval base, a coal strike and the lack of inward investment. Grant approved a further £20 increase even though Anderson's sales had not reached the level required for such an award.⁵⁹ In other cases slum clearance and depressed local conditions were accepted as grounds for more generous treatment and gifts or prizes were used to reward effort without creating a permanently higher salary. This approach was systematic. In January 1933 the majority of letters to travellers noted that their sales had declined or risen only slightly, but then proposed a salary increase as a reward for their hard work in difficult times. In 1937 one traveller was awarded an increase with the proviso that the position would be reviewed if he married to ensure that he was financially 'comfortable'. The 'stickiness' of travellers' salaries then reflected the structure and operation of McVitie's payments system, which, in turn, was a product of management's approach to wage setting. Commission was

used to calculate salary increases, which were cumulative so the performance-related element did not generate large fluctuations in income. The internal labour market was shaped by the assumptions of managers and salesmen about appropriate earnings, with managers willing to take account of their employees' personal circumstances. Unemployment exerted downward pressure on earnings only to the extent that depressed sales reduced commission.

IV

Hosgood emphasised Victorian travellers' confidence in their commercial importance, but in the 1920s travellers' representatives expressed concern about a loss of status. Schedules could be demanding: a Crawfords' traveller recalled twelve hour working days with one meal break in late afternoon.⁶⁰ With their work focused more intensively on specific local territories, salesmen canvassed smaller retailers who would previously have been left to wholesalers. Some confectionery salesmen complained about loss of commission because major customers were supplied as 'house accounts' direct from head office.⁶¹ In addition, some firms centralised the collection of payments rather than relying on their travellers.⁶² From 1897 Rowntree's marketing of Elect cocoa went beyond travellers' contacts with retailers by increasing advertising and distributing samples and leaflets direct to consumers.⁶³ By the 1930s tentative use of consumer research and external consultants reduced Rowntree's reliance on travellers' advice.⁶⁴ A frequent claim was that advertising and branded goods diminished the importance of sales expertise. Frederick Coysh claimed that 'A man representing a big advertising house like Levers and Nestles becomes largely a collector of orders and not a commercial traveller. His main function as between himself and the firm is to see that the figures do not fall off'.⁶⁵ Such testimony was informed, but not disinterested and it is hard to determine the extent or impact of such changes given the halting and haphazard nature of Britain's 'retailing revolution'. Branded goods and advertising, though increasingly common from the late nineteenth century, were not adopted systematically.⁶⁶ Consequently the salesman's role retained much of its earlier character and value. Their contacts, knowledge of customers and their roles in collecting orders and payments remained important. Travellers valued their role as 'confidential men' who were personally close to management.⁶⁷ NUCT's chairman described the traveller as the 'intelligence department of his firm'.⁶⁸ Coats's pricing and discounting policies relied on salesmen as a key source of information on rival price-cutters as well as for disseminating and enforcing the firm's own policies. Manufacturers

continued to use sales conferences to consult their travellers about the state of the market, the effectiveness of advertising and new products.⁶⁹

Even where firms adopted new marketing methods, salesmen remained important. Advertising agencies presented their services as complementing the traveller's role in understanding markets and stimulating orders. Some advertisements in the trade press featured individual salesmen, emphasising the importance of personal relationships and firms routinely looked for good trade connections when hiring new travellers.⁷⁰ If anything there was greater emphasis on the importance of personal contacts as a key component in 'scientific salesmanship'. Jeffreys identified a trend after 1920 for leading manufacturers to offer more 'elaborate services' to retailers including advice on products, display and sales techniques.⁷¹ The salesman was the conduit for this strategy so the act of selling, though subject to greater analysis, remained critical. One trade journal described CT as 'often a real friend and counsellor to the retail draper' not merely a 'taker of orders'.⁷² Both sales advice manuals and travellers' representatives resolved the tensions between manufacturers' control and travellers' autonomy by emphasising the value of personality in marketing.⁷³ Travellers embraced the 'modern' emphasis on the importance of selling for maintaining production, though this involved a shift in emphasis, at least within the sales advice literature.⁷⁴ Experience and an innate ability to sell still featured, often accompanied by scepticism about new 'scientific' methods, but salesmen were encouraged to be disciplined and to possess the right personality, particularly the ability to empathise. Advice manuals depicted travelling as a source of opportunities and autonomy providing the representative was knowledgeable, resourceful and proactive.⁷⁵ Such rhetoric reflected the significant elements of autonomy in the travellers' work that still distinguished them from the increasingly supervised world of the clerk or sales assistant. Despite some doubts, travellers retained a sense of their commercial value.

V

Hosgood revealed the Victorian traveller's world as a male culture centred on the commercial room in hotels and characterised by self-confidence.⁷⁶ Travelling, unlike clerical work, remained a male preserve, though some women in retailing probably undertook similar duties. Even during World War I only a handful of women became travellers, sometimes directly replacing husbands who had enlisted.⁷⁷ A women traveller in the food trade from 1919 enjoyed the work, but had not met 'another lady commercial for six years' and disliked commercial hotels where 'a woman feels lonely in a

crowd'.⁷⁸ There were 2,604 female commercial travellers in 1921 and 2,570 in 1931. The leading association had only 100 women among its 17,000 members in 1929 and there was opposition to allowing women to join.⁷⁹

Elements of travellers' culture did change. George Mason believed fewer travellers ate in the commercial rooms as more restaurants were available and that travellers returned home more frequently rather than engaging in extended road trips.⁸⁰ A pro-temperance traveller noted the greater use of restaurants, a decline in the drinking culture and less frequent social contacts as salesmen drove rather than using trains.⁸¹ After 1918 more expensive railway travel, including excess baggage charges, encouraged the switch to cars. Motoring also facilitated direct access to individual retailers rather than requiring them to visit hotel showrooms where salesmen displayed their wares.⁸² Older travellers, reportedly, lamented the loss of tradition and complained that the commercial room had become 'a debating ground for motor-mad youths whose sole subject of conversation is miles per gallon and miles per hour'.⁸³ Cars replaced horse-drawn transport, especially for rural travellers, and some salesmen were even provided with drivers. Where firms provided cars, even relatively poorly paid travellers could have the cachet of being motorists, including for family outings, though employers discouraged non-work use.⁸⁴

Salesmen's work roles often took them away from home during the week, limiting their domestic presence. If, as Crossick and Haupt argue, family life and localism were central tenets of lower middle-class culture then travellers faced a basic tension. In practice, salesmen's family life may have been at one end of a continuum since Hammerton has identified variations in the character of lower middle-class domesticity as well as the aspirations of husbands and wives.⁸⁵ Some salesmen returned home each night, but those 'on the road' returned only at weekends. One trade journal reflected on the 'limited and crippled' nature of home-life with paternal absences allegedly leading to ill-disciplined children and harassed wives. It urged salesmen to be active fathers during their summer holidays, in order to support their wives and relate to their children.⁸⁶ Such periodic efforts were problematic: the impact of regular absences on relationships is highlighted in Peter Nicholls' autobiography. His father was a grocery traveller for the Co-op. Nicholls describes his father as being progressively diminished in status when at home compared to his mother and grandmother who were always present. He recalls that his perception that his father lacked 'male' qualities of technical expertise. From being resented as an intrusion or disruption to home routines by his sons, the father

eventually inspired hatred.⁸⁷ Nicolls was alienated by his father's style of humour, though the autobiography indicates that other people recollected the traveller as a sociable man. This indicates the complexities inherent in emphasising the role of personality in selling: forms of behaviour honed 'on the road' might jar at home.⁸⁸ The divisions between work and home produced gender divisions in families from many backgrounds, but such contrasts were more marked in the lives of commercial travellers. Absences from home presumably made it easier, and more appealing, for travellers to sustain their male-oriented work culture, but it compromised their links to domesticity.

If domesticity could be problematic, salesmen sustained their associational life from the nineteenth century, indicating a continuing sense of professional identity and mutuality. In the mid-1920s the combined membership of leading travellers' organisations was around 22,500, though this represented only 24 per cent of the 1921 census figure for all commercial travellers. The UK Commercial Travellers' Association, established in 1883, was the leading organisation with a total of 18,000 members by 1926.⁸⁹ The Scottish Commercial Travellers' Association, formed in 1904 following a split from UKCTA, had 3,332 members in 1928.⁹⁰ Religious faith was another source of organisation. The Commercial Travellers' Christian Association (CTCA) was established in 1888 in Scotland, with support from one of the owners of McVitie and Price. It placed bibles in hotels and published a monthly journal largely composed of information on British towns and hotel advertising.⁹¹ There was one specialised trade grouping, the Manufacturing Confectioners' Commercial Travellers' Association (MCCTA), which was formed in 1900.⁹² Its activities centred in the key trade locations of Bristol, Birmingham, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle and York; new groups were formed in Scotland and Northern Ireland in the late 1930s. Membership increased from 653 in 1921 to 891 in 1937 when MCCTA claimed to represent 75 percent of travellers in its sector.⁹³ MCCTA participated actively in the Federation of Confectioners' Associations of the UK, alongside manufacturers, wholesalers and retailers.⁹⁴ All of the associations provided a means of support and contacts for a highly mobile profession.

Professional associations concentrated on issues of direct relevance to their members' daily work, such as the cost and terms of railway travel, hotel rates, postal charges, accident insurance, parking permits and the regulatory activities of local councils and police. They disseminated information on job opportunities and some operated employment bureaus between the wars. Travellers' organisations were integrated into local business networks, usually being represented on their local

Chambers of Commerce.⁹⁵ The Newcastle branch of UKCTA invariably had the Lord Mayor or a leading alderman as its honorary president.⁹⁶ NUCT was the most politically minded organisation. Other associations lobbied for pro-business initiatives, such as the formation of a Ministry of Commerce or reform of the Consular Service to better support business.⁹⁷ However confectionery travellers were divided about whether it was appropriate for their organisation to support the manufacturers' campaign over sugar duties.⁹⁸ Generally associations shared the middle-class convention of not discussing politics, reflected in one official's comment that 'Within the Association, they knew no politics'.⁹⁹ Some UKCTA members were critical when their secretary stood as a Liberal candidate. But in 1924 one local committee commented that the return of the Conservatives to government would promote 'a feeling of confidence and hopefulness that all will be secure'.¹⁰⁰ In 1931 the branch's incoming president commented favourably on national government as means of achieving greater stability.¹⁰¹ Earlier an official complained about the burden of taxation, particularly the expansion of 'social services'.¹⁰² In part the resentments reflected travellers' specific concerns as when the Ministry of Transport was associated with high railway fares or the Ministry of Labour described as 'chiefly a furnisher of chairmen for debating assemblies'. The critique of taxation and the state was rooted in a sense that commercial travellers were disadvantaged, despite the evidence of rising real incomes. In other respects the tone of the comments lends support to Perkins' suggestion of a fault-line within professional society between those employed in the private sector and those working for the state.¹⁰³ One association official argued that 'Twenty years ago the country got on quite well without Ministries of Health, Labour, Transport and the like. Each of these Ministries has entailed the employment of an Army of Officials and has had to justify its existence by the creation of more or less costly work, much of which is of very doubtful value if it is not positively wasteful and injurious'. The provision of 'dole', though intended to deter revolution, had, he asserted, been a 'supporter and breeder of revolutionaries.' Health insurance was portrayed as 'merely an endowment for Doctors'. Such sentiments limited the scope for middle-class unity. Nonetheless travellers' organisations closely resembled those among independent retailers, such as grocers and confectioners, in their persistence, fluctuating membership, regional focus and pragmatism.

Branches were the focus of associational life, which is consistent with Crossick and Haupt's emphasis of the local orientation of the lower middle-class. In fact, contacts were regional rather than purely local. The Scottish Commercial Travellers' Association (SCTA) was dominated by Glasgow and

Edinburgh, which accounted for 43 per cent and 25 per cent of its membership respectively around 1931.¹⁰⁴ Many travellers who worked in Glasgow lived outside the city; Edinburgh branch members included individuals resident in Fife, Angus, the Borders and Glasgow.¹⁰⁵ This qualifies the notions of a middle-class identity centred on localism and domesticity since the Borders or Fife traveller was likely to have separate professional and domestic social worlds. The specialist confectionery association also recruited widely, with salesmen joining the branch in the region where they worked rather near their place of residence. Although interest in associations remained a feature of travellers' culture, their mobility contributed to instability. Local groups were formed, wound-up and revived regularly; turnover and the level of unpaid dues were high.¹⁰⁶ In 1926 40 percent of NUCT's membership left and turnover was 52 percent in 1930.¹⁰⁷ Of the 747 members of SCTA's Edinburgh branch in 1928, 11 per cent had left by 1929. With an average of 5 per cent leaving the roll annually, only 52 per cent of the 1928 membership was still present by 1936. In Glasgow SCTA membership peaked at 1,637 in 1929. During 1930 the branch enrolled 201 new members, but 31 existing members died, 53 resigned and 86 were removed from the roll because their subscriptions were over two years in arrears.¹⁰⁸ Presumably the city drew few travellers as its industrial economy faltered. Many members refused to pay higher subscription rates in 1936, signalling limits to professional loyalty. The force of localism was a further influence with some members transferring to a new branch in Ayr.¹⁰⁹ The Edinburgh and Leith branch experienced similar trends, though its membership recovered strongly in the late 1940s.¹¹⁰ It is unclear, how far the associational contacts were linked to or reinforced by membership of Masonic lodges, though there was at least one commercial travellers' lodge.¹¹¹

The general associations all provided insurance, welfare services and legal assistance to members and their families. This placed travellers within the broader pattern of mutuality within the petit-bourgeoisie and among workers. The UK Commercial Travellers' Benefit Society had 8,800 members in 1930.¹¹² SCTA's Friendly Society attracted only about ten per cent of its membership, suggesting that few salesmen relied on their professional links for their savings and welfare needs.¹¹³ Conversely membership of the UKCTA Benefit Society in Newcastle was equivalent to about half that of the local UKCTA branch, which implies greater participation. The merging among lower-middle class salaried occupations was apparent when one Commercial Travellers' Friendly Society broadened its membership to include all commercial and professional workers. Travellers soon became a minority

among warehousemen, draughtsmen and clerical workers.¹¹⁴ Some employers, including Coats and McVitie's, provided pensions on an ad-hoc basis.

Travellers inhabited a variety of social worlds. Royalty patronised the annual fund-raising drives for the Royal Commercial Travellers' Schools in the 1920s. This drew support from London society, the City of London and leading manufacturers as well as from local branches.¹¹⁵ Within individual firms, travellers were clearly identified with middle management, on a par with such 'inside staff' as buyers and clerks.¹¹⁶ These contacts were reflected in a lunch club organised by travellers, under-managers and buyers from the Co-operative Wholesale Society in Manchester. They invited JB Priestley to one of their meetings, indicating their engagement with literary culture. Priestley's report emphasised the highly regional flavour of their humour, the meal and the setting.¹¹⁷ Other associational activities displayed travellers' participation in 'middlebrow' culture. Whist drives, bowling and golf competitions and children's Christmas parties dominated their social calendars. In Edinburgh fundraising events included performances by amateur opera societies and readings from Dickens. Quarterly meetings were often followed by musical entertainment and the annual general meeting preceded a 'smoking concert' and the presentation of golf prizes. The Glasgow branch of UKCTA held Bohemian concerts in March and November each year.¹¹⁸ Regular concert parties were the stock in trade of 'Ye Jovial Tramps', a club of commercial travellers founded in Glasgow in 1898 'to create good fellowship on and off the road'. Although its membership was initially limited to 60, the club's concerts could attract an audience of 400 in the 1920s with a repertoire of Scottish popular songs and light opera.¹¹⁹ Men dominated business meetings and sporting activities, but social events involved wives and families. In Newcastle a Ladies Committee organised the children's party, annual gala and dance and winter whist drives.¹²⁰ Women participated in afternoon whist drives and meetings, establishing their own networks, linked to occupational status and localism, but not domestic in character. The branches of the Commercial Travellers' Christian Union arranged excursions, though their monthly meetings centred on talks on religious themes and sermons plus teas in line with their temperance principles.¹²¹ Branches of other associations held annual church services, often jointly with local members of other travellers' organisations.¹²² Although Hosgood stressed commercial travellers' preference for separation from shopkeepers, trade journals indicate close contacts with retailers, presumably mixing business networking with socialising. Travellers on Tyneside combined with the local confectioners' association to provide hospitality for visiting conference delegates from the

National Union of Retailers.¹²³ Salesmen participated in the Glasgow Grocers and Provision Merchants' annual outing, usually a boat trip down the Clyde and two travellers held the presidency of the excursion committee in the 1920s. Salesmen employed in manufacturing socialised with colleagues, blending occupational and corporate cultures. A biscuit salesman recalled that his sales manager, SH 'Pa' Rawsthorne, treated the Midlands' representatives like a family, but also that this paternalism generated disputes and tensions.¹²⁴ Crawford's commercial travellers in the English Midlands formed a Social League in 1922 whose activities including an annual picnic with wives to places including Bradford-on-Avon, Arley, Weston-super-Mare, the Cotswolds and Alton Towers. The firm's travellers in Manchester established a similar Social League in 1931; their Liverpool Travellers and wives visited Windemere in 1929. Salesmen then participated to varying degrees in their own societies and in corporate cultures whose activities had much in common with the associational life of small retailers.

VI

Hosgood demonstrated that Victorian travellers had a powerful sense of their economic role and common interests. The effects of war, recessions and the increasing influence of manufacturers over marketing tested these attributes after 1914. The evidence from Coats and McVitie's indicates that the majority of commercial travellers were on the margins of the lower middle-class in terms of income. A successful traveller could rise quickly to a more secure level of income, but relatively few progressed to very high earnings. For most salesmen, incomes peaked after 6 to 8 years. Wartime inflation depressed their real earnings dramatically. Their principal security was that their nominal salary rarely fell so real earnings generally increased over the interwar period. Employers intended commission systems to stimulate maximum effort by their travellers. But this was difficult to implement fully when depressed trading conditions resulted in frustration and declining commitment. In addition, managers operated within their own cultural parameters, defining the occupation primarily as one for men and being willing to raise salaries for married men. This approach created 'insider' labour markets leading to wage 'stickiness'. Testing the Coats and McVitie's data against the records of other business might reveal more complex patterns. Security of real earnings was less likely in more depressed or fashion-oriented trades, such as textiles, in smaller businesses or where commission supplied a higher proportion of the traveller's income. In the latter case there were presumably greater fluctuations in annual earnings and perhaps a higher turnover among travellers.

Travellers' work retained considerable autonomy and variety. Its fundamental reliance on interpersonal skills made individual effort and expertise crucial for travellers' effectiveness and earnings in ways that separated them from office workers. Some manufacturers exerted increasing influence over these aspects and travellers perceived a threat to their status and individualism. Their principal responses were to emphasise the professionalism of 'legitimate' travellers and to restate the importance of individual personality and enterprise for the success of the new 'systems' of advertising and marketing. Unlike bank workers, male commercial travellers faced no challenge from the increasing employment of women workers. Salesmen contributed little to lower-middle class radicalism and even the wartime fall in real earnings only produced limited enthusiasm for union activity. Some companies provided a social focus for their salesmen, identifying them as part of middle management through annual conferences, dinners and outings. Professional associations supplied a further of solidarity through similar programmes of concerts, whist, golf, Christmas parties and excursions. Confectionery salesmen sustained their own specialist association and other bodies emphasised temperance or religious principles. But in the main, general associations supplied social contacts and welfare benefits for a particularly mobile occupational group. These various 'cultures of fraternity' were under pressure from the depressed state of trade between the wars and the regularity of contacts in commercial rooms may have declined. With shorter journeys and more frequent returns home, travellers perhaps had a greater domestic presence and, if so, more opportunities to rely on their local communities for social contacts and leisure pursuits. Whether in company-sponsored activities or their own association, travellers' leisure activities fell within the increasingly prevalent 'middlebrow' culture. Travellers defined themselves as professionals, emphasising their enterprise and association with business. On the one hand, expertise was proclaimed as a defence of their autonomy and fundamental economic role as marketing systems changed. Personal qualities and effort were seen as the vital attributes that allowed travellers to be more than cogs in the machine of commerce. On the other hand, links were made to the development of 'scientific salesmanship' in which the traveller, though more scripted and directed, acquired new skills. In this fashion, travellers staked their claims to be part of a modernising lower middle-class and to be closer to technicians and managers than clerks.

Chart 1

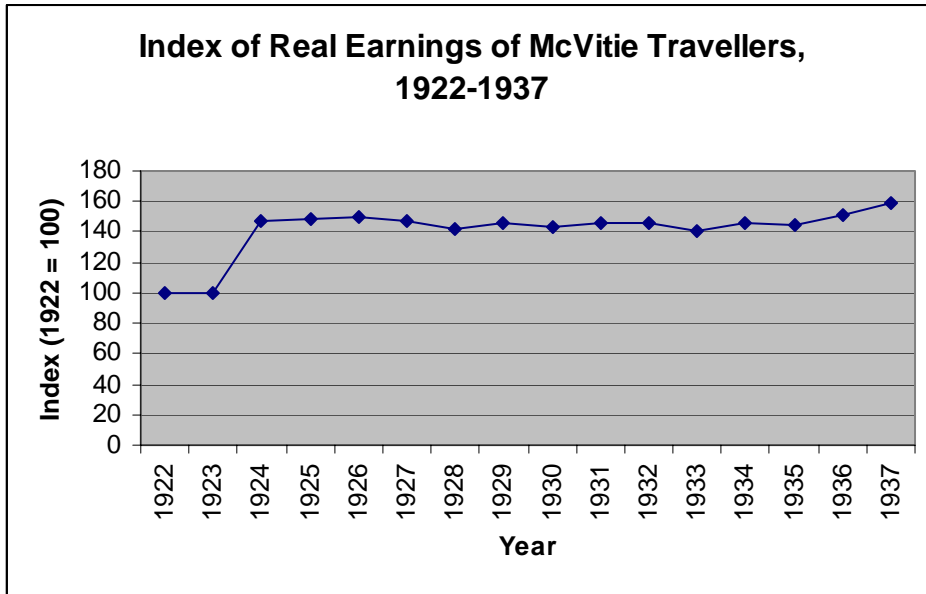
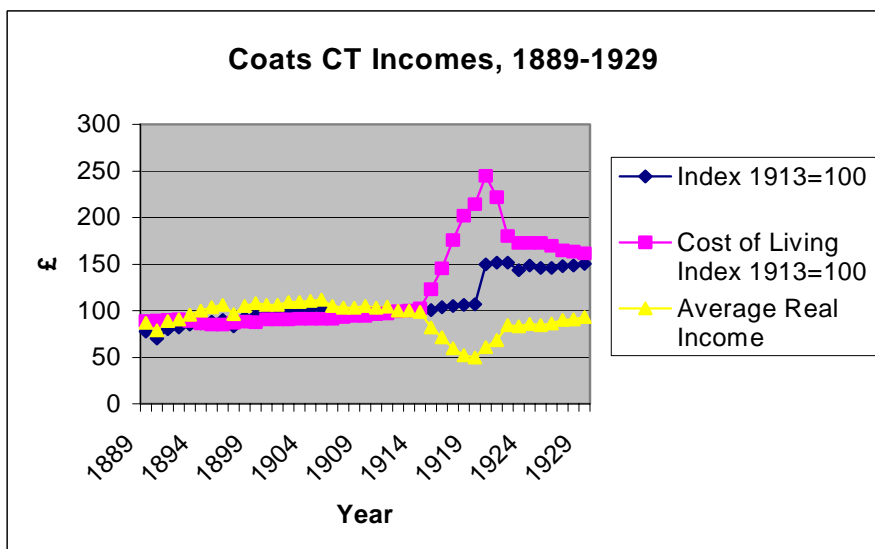


Chart 2



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⁷ Crossick and Haupt, The petit-bourgeoisie.

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¹² Priestley, English journey, pp.35-6, 398.

¹³ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, pp. 1502-3.

¹⁴ The Times, 20 May 1933, p. 14; Scottish Trader, 24 April 1936, p. 6.

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¹⁷ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, pp. 1502-3, 1518-9.

¹⁸ McKibbin, Classes and cultures, pp.44-46, 72-74; Jeffery, 'A place in the nation', p. 74; Abrams, Condition of the British, pp.86-7.

¹⁹ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, pp. 1504, 1519.

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- ²⁰ See Payne, 'Emergence' pp.529-530; Chandler, Scale and scope, p.289; Wilson, British business history, p.104.
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- ²³ Manual earnings taken from Boyer, 'Living standards' in Floud and Johnson(eds), *Cambridge economic history*, volume II, p.286, table 11.3.
- ²⁴ Alford estimated an average salary of £400 and a maximum of £800 around 1900 while Coats' travellers averaged only £258 with a highest salary of £500. The differential persisted in 1911 when travellers in Wills' Bristol office averaged £452 compared to the Coats' average of £269. See Bristol Record Office, WD and HO Wills Archive, 38159/E/3/11.
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⁵² NAS, MacFarlane, GD 381/3/21, AG Grant to SC Ross, 18 January 1934.

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⁵⁴ Adam(ed), Business diaries, pp.51, 88.

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⁶⁴ Fitzgerald, Rowntree, pp. 108, 119.

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⁶⁵ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, p. 1506, 1521; Beable, On the road, p.52.

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⁷⁵ Lewis, Practical commercial travelling, pp.2-4; Casson, Twelve tips, pp.88-90, 124; Findler, Tips, tactics, pp.14-5.

⁷⁶ Hosgood, "The "Knights of the Road"", p. 530.

⁷⁷ Crawford's 3 women travellers in the war were all were married to Crawford travellers who had enlisted. See NAS, MacFarlane, GD 381/1/28, Crawford's Lady Travellers. See also Adam(ed), Business diaries, pp.11, 13; Coats hired three female travellers during World War I, of whom two transferred to other departments in 1922. See BRC, JP Coats, UGD199/1/21/11.

⁷⁸ Good Lines, December 1926, pp.4-5.

⁷⁹ Tyne and Wear Archives Services, Newcastle, UK Commercial Travellers' Association, Newcastle Branch Archives (hereafter TWAS), ASCT1/3/4, Handbook, 1921, p.13; The Drapers' Record, 3 April 1920, p.21; The Confectioners' Union, 18 July 1922, p.1573; Seventy years, pp. 66, 70; Nickols, Fifty years, pp.147, 215-9; NAS, GD1/1033/4, Records of the Scottish Commercial Travellers' Friendly Society, Annual General Meeting, 4 March 1939.

⁸⁰ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, p.1522.

⁸¹ Davidson, Fifty years, pp.48-9, 59, 71.

⁸² Confectionery News, 1 September 1937, pp.17-19 and 8 December 1937, p.31.

⁸³ Lewis, Practical commercial travelling, pp.95-7.

⁸⁴ Nickols, Fifty years, pp. 66-69, 86-7

⁸⁵ Hammerton, 'Perils', pp. 261-276.

⁸⁶ Good Lines, August 1925, pp. 1-4; for similar concerns see The Commercial Traveller, 49 (XIII) March 1936, p.10.

⁸⁷ Nichols, Feeling you're behind, pp.9-10, 22-25, 33 56.

⁸⁸ The Confectioners' Union, 18 June 1921, p.1487 and 1 March 1923 pp.591-3.

⁸⁹ Committee on Industry and Trade, Minutes, p. 1502.

⁹⁰ Scottish Trader, 28 April 1928, pp.4-8.

⁹¹ Davidson, On the road, pp.50-1; Good Lines.

⁹² The Confectioners' Union, 1 January 1924, pp.99-107.

⁹³ Confectionery News, 14 November 1936, pp.1753-59 and 15 December 1937, pp.9-12.

⁹⁴ The Confectioners' Union, 19 March 1923, p.563.

⁹⁵ TWAS, ASCT1/1/4, Minutes, 27 February 1920; Scottish Trader, 3 January 1920, p. 12.

⁹⁶ TWAS, ASCT1/3/8, Handbook, 1931, pp. 2-3.

⁹⁷ NAS, GD412/8/2, Annual Report of Central Council, 1918.

⁹⁸ The Confectioners' Union, 1 January 1924, pp.99-107.

⁹⁹ NAS, SCTA, GD 412/4/8, AGM Minutes, 8 December 1923.

¹⁰⁰ NAS, SCTA, GD 412/8/5, Annual Report of Executive Committee, 1924.

¹⁰¹ NAS, SCTA, GD 412/1/4, AGM Minutes, 10 October 1931.

¹⁰² NAS, SCTA, GD 412/1/4, AGM Minutes, 10 December 1927.

¹⁰³ Perkin, Rise of professional society, pp. 390-1.

¹⁰⁴ Scottish Trader 1 November 1929, pp. 19-20.

¹⁰⁵ NAS, SCTA, GD412/1/4, Minutes, 12 February 1925.

¹⁰⁶ Seventy years.

¹⁰⁷ National Archives, FS12/308 National Union of Commercial Travellers, Annual Return, 1926 and 1930.

¹⁰⁸ Scottish Trader, 19 December 1930, p. 8.

¹⁰⁹ Scottish Trader, 1 December 1928, p. 13, 1 November 1929, pp. 19-20, 6 December 1929, p. 21, 17 December 1937, pp. 10-1, 16 December 1938, p. 12, and 20 December 1940, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ NAS, SCTA, GD 412/1/4, Minutes, 10 March 1934, GD 412/1/5, AGM, 10 December 1938 and GD412/1/6 AGM, 9 December 1944, AGM 12 January 1952 and Executive Meeting, 12 November 1954.

¹¹¹ Frederick Coysh was master of a commercial travellers' lodge, see Good Lines, October 1931, pp. 3-5.

¹¹² Scottish Trader, 10 January 1930, p. 8.

¹¹³ Scottish Trader, 24 April 1920, pp. 10-16, 24 April 1931, pp. 8,10; NAS GD1/1033/2, AGM, 4 March 1922 and 7 March 1931.

¹¹⁴ Commercial Friendly Society of Scotland archives, Mitchell Library, Glasgow, TD932/3/3 Rules and TD932/4/1, Roll Book, 1838-1963.

¹¹⁵ The Confectioners' Union, 22 December 1923, pp.637, 735-737; The Drapers' Record, 12 March 1921, p.697, 705-6.

¹¹⁶ The Drapers' Record, 23 July 1921, p.209, 19 February 1921, p.497; The Confectioners' Union, 18 January 1922, p.127.

¹¹⁷ Priestley, English journey, pp.135, 260-61. See also Nichols, Feeling you're behind, pp. 9, 12-13, 43, 147

¹¹⁸ Scottish Trader 17 March 1928, p. 18 and 1 November 1929, pp. 19-20; Perth and Kinross Council Archives, Perth, MS179, Scottish Commercial Travellers' Association (Perth Branch), Minutes, 1938-1947.

¹¹⁹ Scottish Trader, 13 March 1920 p. 5, 4 June 1927, p. 13, August 1932, p.4 and 25 December 1936, p. 13.

¹²⁰ TWAS, AS/CT/3/10 Jubilee Handbook, p.2; AS/CT/4/2, Ladies Committee, Minutes, 13 January 1920, 29 June 1920; AS/CT/1/4/4, Minutes 9 January 1931.

¹²¹ Good Lines, December 1920, p. 28, February 1921, p. 4.

¹²² TWAS, ASCT1/3/10, Jubilee Handbook, p.2.

¹²³ The Confectioners' Union, 18 December 1922, pp. 2757-2761.

¹²⁴ .NAS, GD381/1/26, Crawford's Personalities.