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The metropolitan geographies of elite shopping: Mary Leigh and Roger Newdigate in Georgian London

Introduction

The importance of Georgian London as a source of luxury goods is a commonplace. Work by Peck, Vickery, Greig and others has painted a vivid picture of London's pivotal role in supplying metropolitan and provincial elites. Indeed, such was the bond between London and elite consumption that it became a perennial complaint amongst social and political commentators. The problem was that residence in and dependence upon London led to the abandonment of the countryside and consequently a withering of local trade. Wealthy landowners, it was argued, looked to London retailers not just for luxury goods, but also more mundane items such as groceries. They could provide discerning consumers with variety, choice and quality that their country cousins could not hope to match. Moreover, the number and quality of London shops was constantly increasing – a phenomenon that was as striking to Daniel Defoe in the early eighteenth century as it was to Sophie von la Roche some 60 years later, although their reactions were rather different. Defoe was alarmed by the growing trend for decoration and showiness, whereas von la Roche revelled in the brilliantly lighting and elaborate displays. She particularly noted 'lovely Oxford Street', marking the emergence of what we now call the West-End as the most dynamic, fashionable and increasingly the most important shopping district.

We thus know a lot about the importance of London retailers and their shifting geography. Less well understood are the ways in which these two were linked through the spatial practices of wealthy consumers. Walsh has written extensively on shopping behaviour and the ways in which this was linked to changes in the nature of retail premises, but only Berry's work has really started to get to grips with the geography of metropolitan shopping during this period. Yet many questions remain unanswered: where, precisely, did elites shop? How was this linked to their place of residence, experience of London or longevity in the city? And what difference did gender make? More generally, were geographical changes in shopping driven by demand or supply-side factors?

This paper explores these questions by mapping the metropolitan shopping habits of two wealthy individuals with estates in rural Warwickshire and houses in London. Sir Roger Newdigate (1719-1806) was MP for Middlesex and later for Oxford University. Twice married and a veteran of two Grand Tours, he was a pioneer of the Gothic style, gradually remodelling Arbury Hall over a number of decades. The Honourable Mary Leigh (1732-1806) was the sister of Edward, fifth Lord Leigh of Stoneleigh Abbey, and lived in London for much of her early life. In 1774 she took charge of the Warwickshire estate after Edward was declared insane and inherited as life tenant on his death in 1786. Mary never married.

Retail geographies and shopping patterns

Following perhaps 150 years of profound changes in the structure and geography of its retailing, an 1803 guidebook, *The Picture of London*, informed its readers that the capital's key shopping streets were arranged in two lengthy east-west axes running from the City, along

Holborn to Oxford Street and along Ludgate Hill and the Strand to the St James. This pattern reflected the burgeoning number of large and fashionable shops in the West End – a phenomenon that struck visitors so forcibly, perhaps because this was the area in which they spent much of their time, going to theatres and parks, paying visits, and travelling to and from their lodgings. But it also reflected the continued strength of retailing in the City itself.

This broad distribution of shops is perhaps at odds with popular conceptions of an increasingly dominant West-End, but is closely matched by the shopping patterns of Sir Roger Newdigate who particularly favoured the southern of the two axes identified in the *Picture of London*. In terms of numbers, 25 of his 72 London suppliers were ranged along Ludgate Hill, Fleet Street and the Strand, with a further 12 being located in the streets immediately around his house on Spring Gardens. From these shops, he acquired books, furniture, china, groceries, wine, silverware and candles – practically the full range of his recorded purchases. Yet this distribution was neither straightforward nor unchanging. If we examine where he spent most money, the apparent concentration along the Strand evaporates; instead, it is the City that stands out, especially in the period up to 1780 (when he stopped being an MP). During this period, he spent large amounts with City of London grocers, wine merchants, coopers and, to a lesser extent, china dealers and silversmiths. Thereafter, the distribution becomes more balanced, although the average spent at his suppliers along the Strand remained relatively low.

The shopping patterns of Mary Leigh are best considered in two phases. In the 1750s and 1760s, when she lived near Hanover Square, much of her shopping took place in the streets between Oxford Street and St James, or in those around Covent Garden. Of the 42 retailers that she patronised, only four were on streets in the City or around Holborn. However, as with Sir Roger, the simple distribution tells only part of the story: whilst suppliers in the West-End enjoyed the greatest number of transactions with Mary, the amount spent and the size of the bills presented was generally very modest. The impression that these were not Mary's main suppliers is reinforced by the type of goods being bought: gloves, lace and millinery; perfumed soap, tea cups, mineral water and toys. It was the shopkeepers around Covent Garden and, to a lesser extent, in the City that presented far larger bills and provided the substantial quantities of cloth, jewellery and food that were central to her status as a wealthy aristocrat.

After she had inherited the Stoneleigh estate in 1786, Mary's shopping patterns changed. Despite the general drift westwards of fashionable shopping, her suppliers became more dispersed, but clearly shifted east into more traditional retail areas in and around the City, the latter being especially important in the provision of groceries. Furthermore, whilst West-End shopkeepers continued to present relatively modest bills, those further east were clearly supplying Mary with substantial quantities of goods, their bills averaging over £40 compared with just £12 in the West-End.

How do we best interpret these patterns and what do they tell us about ways in which behaviour was shaped by gender and status?

Understanding shopping behaviour

Perhaps the simplest explanation for shopping behaviour, and one that is favoured by classic economic theory, is that consumers sought to minimise effort, choosing shops that were

convenient. There is some evidence that both Mary and Sir Roger chose to shop in the streets close to their respective homes. Nearly half the shops patronised by Mary during the 1750s and 1760s were within 1km of her rooms on Hanover Square, whilst one-sixth of those supplying Sir Roger lay within four blocks of his residence. That said, Mary's use of West-End shops largely persisted even when she moved out of London in the 1780s, and Sir Roger's spending in these 'local' shops grew after left Parliament and his visits to London became far less frequent. Moreover, convenience is a product of relative location only if the consumer is visiting the shop in person to make their purchases. Berry has shown that the Durham gentlewoman, Judith Baker, was to some extent constrained in this way, perhaps because of her reluctance to hire a carriage and travel further from her lodgings with relatives near Grosvenor Square. Equally Jane Austen shopped primarily in the streets around her brother's rooms on Henrietta Street.

Neither Mary nor Sir Roger appear to have had their horizons restricted in this way – both were willing and able to range across metropolitan space. Mary regularly hired carriages for trips within and beyond the metropolis, and Sir Roger was an enthusiastic walker, often engaging in shopping as part of his urban walks. His diary makes several references to such activities, including one for March 1776 which notes that he 'walked to Ellicot, left watch to clean, over Blackfriars and Westminster Bridge to H[ouse of Commons]'. Assuming that he started from Spring Gardens, this meant a round trip of 4-5km.

Wealthy consumers were also able to send servants on errands, if they chose to do so. On occasions, this could involve a considerable amount of effort; a certain John Taylor writing to Mary in 1803 that he had been unable to source a particular type of satin despite having 'searcht all silk mercers, that I can think on, for it'. More often, she wrote to shopkeepers directly and had goods dispatched to Kensington or Stoneleigh. In this way, the inconvenience of space was overcome by corresponding with trusted shopkeepers. This allowed them to engage shopkeepers more distant from their London homes, including those in the City which provided such a large proportion of their purchases. It also meant that they could maintain these relationships when they were back in their country houses or suburban villas.

Being able to access shops across the city might allow a dispersed web of suppliers, but it does not help to explain why Sir Roger and Mary Leigh chose to shop in the places they did. One constraint which may have been important was the detailed geography of particular trades. Whilst the close supervision which had encouraged concentration of activities under guild control had long passed, there were still significant clusters: booksellers around St Pauls Churchyard and Paternoster Row; coach makers on Long Acre; instrument makers around Cornhill, and later men's tailoring around Jermyn Street and furniture dealers on Tottenham Court Road. These concentrations imposed a degree of gendering on the pattern of shopping. Men might congregate in the book shops, the coach makers' yards, upholsterers' showrooms and, of course, the coffee houses that interspersed these spaces. Women, meanwhile, would be most visible in the mercers, haberdashers, milliners and toyshops. However, quite apart from the stereotyping that this involves, and the fact that there are numerous advertising and satirical prints portraying couples shopping together or men in milliners (eyeing up the shop assistants), neither areas of retail specialisation nor concentrations of spending were particularly well defined. To take just one example, Sir Roger bought books from retailers in traditional areas such as Ave Maria Lane, Fleet Street and the Strand, but also Russell Street, Leicester Fields, Pall Mall, Piccadilly and New Bond Street.

This spread of purchasing both reflected and encouraged the dispersal of trades. It also formed part of the westward march of retailing to the growing and fashionable residential districts of Westminster. Streets such as New Bond Street, Bruton Street, Piccadilly and, of course, Oxford Street marked out the up-and-coming retail districts. As we noted earlier, it was the brightly lit, spacious and well-appointed shops in these places that struck visitors most strongly. They certainly formed an important pull for ambitious shopkeepers. Josiah Wedgwood is perhaps most famous in deliberating over the right address for his new showrooms, wanting a location that was exclusive yet convenient and dismissing Pall Mall as too accessible to the common folk. But his was just one of a long list of fashionable West-End shops that were established in the later decades of the eighteenth century. Both Sir Roger and Mary Leigh were drawn to these bright lights, the former buying china from Wedgwood on Greek Street and furniture from Gillows on Oxford Street, and the latter acquiring lamps from the Argand Company and haberdashery from Budd and Devall, both on Bruton Street.

Neither of these wealthy consumers were slaves to fashion in terms of what and where they bought. The fashionable streets of the West-End provided a range of goods, but never dominated their shopping patterns; indeed, they declined in relative importance, especially for Mary. In part, this might reflect the fact that, as she grew older, she was less likely to adopt the latest fashions, especially in clothing, not least because it would have been inappropriate to her age – a tendency noted by Vickery and others. But eschewing the attractions of the West-End was possible shops further east remained or indeed enhanced their fashionability. We find evidence of this in the observations of the German visitor, Lichtenberg, who noted in the 1770s that the shops from Cheapside to Fleet Street: 'seem to be made entirely of glass; many thousand candles light up silverware, engraving, books, clocks, glass, pewter, paintings, women's finery, modish and otherwise, gold, precious stones, steel-work, and endless coffee-rooms and lottery offices. The street looks as though it were illuminated for some festivity'.

Clearly these shops were still able to compete with those of the West-End. Indeed, in some ways, they held distinct advantages, Davis noting that a City shopkeeper 'with a good reputation in London and a sound connection among country gentry ... still did a bigger trade than his more showy colleague in Oxford Street who depended much more on what was contemptuously called a "dropping trade"'. Two things are important in this observation. The first is the way that it reflects perfectly the higher total spending by both Sir Roger and Mary Leigh in the City. It was with retailers such as North, Hoare & Hanson on New Bridge Street, Thornhill & Co. in St Pauls Churchyard, and Palmer & Co. of Newgate Street that these wealthy consumers placed their largest orders; not in the fashionable showrooms of the West-End. Such retailers enjoyed an established reputation amongst the provincial gentry, with whom they often had long-standing relationships. This was important in building trust and reducing the transaction costs involved in securing good quality goods at reasonable prices. This is very much the approach taken by Judith Baker, who Berry argues, based her choice of supplier on 'a system of patronage, personal acquaintance and credit'.

It is often difficult to know with any certainty how such relationships were first established, but both personal recommendation and broader networks were important. Mary appears to have gained some of her London contacts via her brother, especially in those areas of expenditure which might be viewed as particularly masculine. She went to the same coach maker, James Cope on Long Acre; the same upholsterer, Thomas Burnett of the Strand; and the same draper (for livery), William Fell of St Martins Lane. But she probably followed the lead of her guardian,

Elizabeth Verney, when it came to mercers, haberdashers and the like. We have a clear example of this: a 1756 bill from James Croft & Co. addressed to 'The Hon Mrs Verney for the Hon Miss Leigh', being followed by several others in the 1750s and 1760s being sent directly to Mary herself. In the absence of such direct introductions other signals of reputation might have become important, for example, the royal associations announced by certain privileged traders. A sample of these from amongst the bills in the Stoneleigh Abbey archive reveals a wide range of retailers advertising royal patronage: everything from glass and china, through prints and books, to whips and hats. Mapping these reveals a distribution that incorporates the Strand and Long Acre, but which centres on the West-End. In one way, this might be seen as an indication of the importance and fashionability of these new shopping districts, but it might also reflect the need for these shopkeepers and shopping streets to establish their credentials and make themselves stand out in an increasingly crowded and widespread metropolitan retail environment.

Conclusions

Retail geographies were undergoing profound changes through the course of the long eighteenth century. In London, the major development was a progressive shift westwards of the most fashionable shopping districts. The bright lights of Oxford Street dazzled visitors and they continue to dazzle retail historians today. As we have seen, however, not all shopping shifted to the West-End, even amongst the wealthy elite. Instead, they chose their suppliers from across the metropolis, remaining loyal to and seeking out new suppliers in traditional shopping districts in the City and along the Strand and Holborn, as well as amongst the newly established businesses of St James and Oxford Street. In short, shopping behaviour was determined by individual choice rather than simply following the shifting centre of gravity of retailing.

Consumer choices were conditioned by many factors, including ideas of fashion and reputation, convenience and specialisation. Each individual weighed up these different factors in making their decisions about where to shop, their choices being conditioned by gender, but also status, taste and personal preference. Sir Roger Newdigate's shopping was moulded in part by his gender, a passion for books, for example, concentrating activity into streets where the book trade predominated. But again, status was important: clothes came from fashionable West-End shops; high quality food and drink from established merchants in the City. Moreover, a house near Charing Cross offered many convenient opportunities; yet his love of walking allowed him to range much more widely than might be expected. For the young Mary Leigh, without family or household responsibilities, gender was an important factor – her West-End shopping was matched to her social life and her patronage of fashionable mercers around Covent Garden was focused on the presentation of a gendered bodily image. As an older landowner, some of these priorities remained, but they were overwritten with others driven by status: for example, the purchase of coaches and silverware from established firms in traditional shopping districts. Shopping habits were not fixed, despite loyalty to particular suppliers, and we therefore need to be alive to the ways in which the gendered nature of consumption was also lifecycle dependent.