

**Marks and Spencer and the social history of food c. 1950 - 1980,  
with particular reference to the relationship between consumer  
behaviour and retailing strategies**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis uses a detailed study of the relationship between the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer and consumer behaviour to examine wider changes in the history of food retail and consumption in Britain between 1950 and 1980. Using material from the Marks and Spencer company archive, it situates these traditional business history sources alongside primary material from a wide range of social, cultural and political and multi-disciplinary scholarship in order to contextualise the company's experiences as a food retailer. The first half of the thesis explores the complexities of this relationship and investigates the ways in which the histories of consumption, retail and supply interacted during the twentieth century. The second half then uses this retailer-customer interface to identify patterns, trends and areas of change and continuity in consumer behaviour through the lens of Marks and Spencer's retail strategies. This includes the development of the company's hygienic food retail practices in the 1940s and its creation of the chilled ready meals sector in 1979.

It finds that Marks and Spencer's focus on the progressive dimensions of advances food technology allowed the company to redefine its relationship with its customers while building on its cultural role as a 'national institution'. This technological emphasis then permeated the company's product range through a series of innovations, first through a focus on hygiene, then by the diversification of its product range and finally through the packaged ready meal. Ultimately, it argues that Marks and Spencer was able to create a new relationship with food consumers and develop retail strategies which allowed the company to navigate and, to a certain extent, actively shape consumer preferences over this thirty year period.

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## Abbreviations

AGM	Annual General Meeting
BLSA	British Library Sound Archive
Defra	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
FACC	Food Additives and Contaminants Committee
HMSO	Her Majesty's Stationery Office
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food
MSCA	Marks and Spencer company archive
NFU	National Farmers' Union
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
TNA	The National Archives

## Introduction

Historians are prone to seeing revolutions everywhere and scholars of the history of consumption are no exception. From a ‘consumer revolution’ and ‘industrious revolution’ in eighteenth-century Britain to a ‘color revolution’ in twentieth-century America, charting the rapid pace of technological change and arguing for the transformational effect this had on the experiences of consumers and *vice versa* has proved to be a popular line of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> The history of food consumption in the twentieth century is concerned with major changes in the ways in which food was produced, sold, purchased and eaten. However, what is most striking about the social history of food in Britain c. 1950 and 1980 are the remarkable continuities in both food-retailing strategies and in the behaviour and demands of consumers. This thesis explores the social history of food consumption by analysing primary material from the Marks and Spencer company archive alongside a wide array of social, cultural and political sources and multi-disciplinary scholarship. In doing so, it sheds light on a small but significant facet of both the British food industry and British social history: the relationship between a food retailer and their customers. It will be seen that the demands and behaviours of consumers underwent significant changes, the most notable of which was the emergence of convenience as a major motivational factor for food purchasing decisions. Ultimately, it finds that Marks and Spencer was able to create a new relationship with food consumers and develop retail strategies

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<sup>1</sup> Neil McKendrick, John Brewer and J.H. Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London: Europa, 1982); Jan De Vries, *The industrious revolution: consumer behavior and the household economy, 1650 to the present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *The Color Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2012).



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which allowed the company to navigate and, to a certain extent, actively shape consumer preferences over this thirty year period.

It did so by focussing on the development of food technologies, beginning in 1949 with the publication of its 'Hygienic Food Handling' manual and culminating in its creation of the chilled ready meals sector in 1979. The periodization of this thesis is determined by these two key landmarks in the company's history. The food retail practices of Marks and Spencer were established in the post-war period with the appointment of Nathan Goldenberg to the food department in 1948 and subsequent publication of the hygiene manual in 1949. The company developed a distinctive marketing strategy which set it apart from other food retailers, as it was not conducting formal market research nor engaging in extensive print or media advertising of its food business. Instead, it was successful in leveraging its involvement in food technologies in order to speak to customers and market the company in different ways, such as through the political sphere. This focus on technology was then applied to the company's product range through a series of developments. The first area in which this was most clearly evident was the company's work on hygienic food practices. It then applied this technological approach to the diversification of its food offering and, eventually, through the sale of pre-packaged chilled ready meals in 1979. This exploration of the interface between Marks and Spencer and its customers thus serves to illuminate the ways in which technological modernity penetrated into the practices of everyday life for British consumers by the 1980s.

The primary and secondary sources with which this thesis engages are inherently multi-disciplinary in scope. The issues and themes which will be addressed, such as the historical geographies of multiple retailing and social constructions of hygiene, are areas of research for which there is a diverse body of scholarship.<sup>2</sup> The analytical framework of this project thus makes a virtue out of the richness of this material by utilising approaches which are not necessarily based in traditional historical scholarship. This includes adopting the ‘thick description’ approach, which originated in ethnographic studies of researchers such as Clifford Geertz in the 1970s, whereby social and cultural codes are viewed as embodied in the actions of individuals and organisations.<sup>3</sup> Whilst drawing upon the wealth of material available in the Marks and Spencer company archive, this is not a straightforward business history. It uses the traditional business history sources of the company to explore the relationship between Marks and Spencer as a food retailer and their customers, in order to investigate the social history of food consumption and retail in Britain in the twentieth century. As such, it shares more in the methodological and analytical approaches of social history than is traditionally found in histories of retailers.

The emergence of social history as a major disciplinary field in the 1960s and 1970s opened up opportunities for historians to conduct research into the experiences of individuals who were not represented in the more traditional areas of economic, political and military history. The study of consumption is, in the widest sense, an

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<sup>2</sup> For example see Gareth Shaw, Andrew Alexander, John Benson and John Jones, ‘Structural and Spatial Trends in British Retailing: The Importance of Firm-Level Studies’, *Business History*, vol. 40, no. 4 (1998) pp. 79 - 93; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

exploration of the transition from the production-based economies of pre-industrial Britain to a capitalist, free market economy. In recent years, the history of consumption has developed into a major sub-discipline in its own right. Much of the ground-breaking work was carried out by historians exploring the roots of the Industrial Revolution, largely initiated by Neil McKendrick's argument that consumer demand for new goods, rather than production, was the major driving force in the process of industrialisation in Britain.<sup>4</sup>

This thesis explores the history of consumption by focusing on the customer-retailer interface. Understanding the complexities, changes and continuities of this interface drives the analysis and sets the project apart from conventional company histories. In doing so, it draws upon a body of scholarship which has developed since the late-1990s and is exemplified in 'the history of retailing and consumption' series published by Ashgate and edited by Gareth Shaw. One of the first monographs to be published was Nancy Cox's work on tradesmen and shopkeepers in 2000. Cox engaged with a wide range of primary material, including shop ledgers and advertisements, and most pertinently, she examined the relationship between individual shopkeepers and their customers to investigate whether they were being responsive to changes in consumer behaviour.<sup>5</sup> Ralph Jessen and Lydia Langer's edited collection *Transformations of Retailing in Europe after 1945* was published in 2012 and, in the introduction, they posed the question which serves as the starting

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<sup>4</sup> Neil McKendrick, 'The Consumer Revolution of Eighteenth-Century England' in McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*. See also Joan Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects: The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978); Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660 - 1760* (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Cox, *The Complete Tradesman: a Study of Retailing, 1550 - 1820* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2000).

point for this thesis: ‘The history of retail - is it a history of endless revolutions?’<sup>6</sup>

Jessen and Langer answer this in the affirmative, arguing in their assessment of the historiography that ‘it seems extremely appropriate to talk of the history of “revolutionary” upheavals in retailing as part of the history of post-war reconstruction in Western Europe’.<sup>7</sup> This thesis shares in the analytical and methodological approaches adopted by contemporary historians of retailing in the second half of the twentieth century by engaging with a wide variety of primary material in order to explore the extent to which individual retailers were responding directly to changes in the demands of consumers or were actively attempting to shape consumer behaviour. However, whilst the prevailing paradigm in the relevant secondary literature is concerned with ‘revolutionary upheavals’, this study of Marks and Spencer’s relationship with their customers finds that that it was continuity, rather than change, which most strongly typified the history of food retail and consumption in the second half of the twentieth century.

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first three chapters explore the nature of the relationship between Marks and Spencer and food consumers. It does so by first considering how the company conceived of its customer base. Chapter 1 finds that it acted as dynamic intermediary within British food supply chains: mediating between the demands of consumers and the changes in food production and manufacture. It unpacks the complexities of how the company perceived the needs and behaviours of consumers and how this in turn served to influence its own retailing practices. It highlights the unusual strategies employed by Marks and Spencer during this period,

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<sup>6</sup> Ralph Jessen and Lydia Langer, ‘Introduction’, Ralph Jessen and Lydia Langer (eds.), *Transformations of Retailing in Europe after 1945* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

as the company conducted neither formal consumer research nor advertised widely. It finds that the company was keen to establish a role for itself in the public sphere: helping to set the terms of retailing policies which were both commercially advantageous and represented the interests of consumers. Chapter 2 explores the social history of consumers in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century and situates these experiences within the wider scholarship on consumption. This exploration of consumer history serves to further contextualise the role that the relationship between retailers and consumers played in shaping the experiences of both and flags up areas of longer-term continuity and change. Chapter 3 explores the history of multiple retailing in Britain, with an emphasis on Marks and Spencer in particular. It considers whether the company was unusual among retailers and what effects its retailing strategies had on its practices and the relationship it established with consumers. These first three chapters establish the complexities of this relationship and investigate the ways in which the histories of consumption, retail and supply have interacted throughout the twentieth century. They examine the distinctive approach to marketing taken by the company, as it conducted neither extensive print or television advertising nor formal market research. Chapter 1 explores the alternative channels through which Marks and Spencer communicated with its customer base, using forums such as the House of Lords and the Food Additives and Contaminants Committee (FACC). It finds that the company was successful in marketing its food retail operations through the public sphere of these political forums and was able to articulate the company's values to consumers and to define what Marks and Spencer stood for. Chapter 2 then identifies the distinctive sell that the company had and what this meant for British food consumers. This is further extended in chapter 3, which explores the distinct nature of Marks and

Spencer's food retailing operations within the context of twentieth-century retail history.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 then go on to explore the nature of this relationship within various contexts in order to identify patterns, trends and areas of change and continuity within the social history of food retail from the post-war period. The ways in which the company's focus on food technologies found its way into the product range is explored through a series of innovations. Chapter 4 locates the first instance of this technological thrust driving the company's food retail strategy in its work on hygiene. It examines what Goronwy Rees has termed the 'revolutionary hygienic code' of Marks and Spencer, beginning in the late-1940s, and finds that retailing practices which prioritised hygiene were the first of a series of innovations in food retailing with a distinct strategic focus.<sup>8</sup> It considers the argument that hygiene is a socially constructed concept and also finds areas of continuity within its meaning and definition for food retailers and consumers in the 1950s. It situates the retail practices of Marks and Spencer within the context of the 'moment of modernity' in 1951 and finds that the company was able to capitalise on the impact that events such as the Festival of Britain had on British culture at that time.<sup>9</sup> Chapter 5 then finds that the company applied this technological focus to its trusted introduction of a more diverse product range. It explores the methods and means by which the company introduced new tastes to the British diet and examines the concept of 'exotic' foodstuffs in the history of consumption. It engages with the idea of dietary choices being constructed along national lines and challenges the assumption that the

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<sup>8</sup> Goronwy Rees, *St Michael: a History of Marks and Spencer* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969) p. 200.

<sup>9</sup> Becky Conekin, Frank Mort and Chris Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945 - 1964* (London: Rivers Oram, 1999).

social history of food in the twentieth century was marked by dramatic changes in retail practices and consumer demands. Instead, it finds that it was the continuity of a particular set of principles which shaped both the company's retailing strategies and consumer behaviours: value for money, choice and quality. It does, however, draw attention to the emergence of convenience as a major factor influencing the demands of consumers from the 1970s onwards. Chapter 6 continues this discussion and draws together many of the themes and issues explored in the rest of the thesis as part of a focussed case study a particular category of food products: the chilled ready meal. It investigates the particular retailing practices of Marks and Spencer in bringing these products to market and examines the social, cultural and economic conditions in which this new sector of food retailing met with success. It identifies the particular point in time at which labour trends such as female participation in the workforce, social changes such as an increase in single-person households, technological advances such as cold chain storage and retailing strategies came together to satisfy the increasing demand for food products which offered consumers convenience at the point of consumption. This final chapter serves as an illuminative case study for the possibilities of using the business archives of a retailer to explore wider issues in social history. Ultimately it argues that the chilled ready meal, as exemplified in Marks and Spencer's launch of the chicken kiev in 1979, may be seen as representing the triumph of technological modernity's penetration into the day-to-day practices of British consumers.

This thesis is the first doctoral dissertation to directly engage with the primary material available in the Marks and Spencer company archive. The archive has previously been used in commissioned histories of the company, such as Goronwy

Rees' 1969 text, Asa Briggs' centenary history, company archivist Paul Bookbinder's research on the wartime experience of the company and Helen Chislett's 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary book.<sup>10</sup> The journalist Judi Bevan published a well-received book on the history of the company in 2001, entitled *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer*.<sup>11</sup> Bevan used archival material alongside interviews with staff members to chart the company's retailing successes and failures. An updated version, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer: - and How It Rose Again*, was published in 2007 to take into account the changing fortunes of the organisation under the leadership of Sir Stuart Rose.<sup>12</sup>

Marks and Spencer was founded by Michael Marks and Thomas Spencer in 1884. Initially a penny bazaar stall on Leeds Kirkgate Market, by 1900 the company had thirty-six branches, which included twenty-four market stalls and twelve shops.<sup>13</sup> These were mainly situated in northern England in towns and cities such as Wigan, Huddersfield, and Wakefield but there were also three shops in London and market stalls in Cardiff and Bath. It became a publicly listed company in 1926 and started to sell food items in 1931.<sup>14</sup> Food products were initially sold under the 'Welbeck' label rather than the 'St Michael' own-brand given to the rest of their product offering. It was not until 1941 that the food sold by the company was deemed to be

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<sup>10</sup> Rees, *St Michael*; Asa Briggs, *Marks & Spencer 1884 - 1984: a centenary history of Marks & Spencer* (London: Octopus, 1984); Paul Bookbinder, *Marks & Spencer: the war years 1939 - 1945* (London: Century Benham, 1989); Helen Chislett, *Marks in Time: 125 Years of Marks & Spencer* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Judi Bevan, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer* (London: Profile Books, 2001).

<sup>12</sup> Judi Bevan, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer: - and How It Rose Again*, Revised edition (London: Profile Books, 2007). Stuart Rose was appointed as Chief Executive of Marks and Spencer in 2004.

<sup>13</sup> Rees, p. 14.

<sup>14</sup> Chislett, *Marks in Time*, p. 126.



of sufficient quality to warrant the 'St Michael' label and by 1956 this label was used exclusively throughout the entire product range. The 1930s were a pivotal period for the company, with retailing principles established during the interwar years which were to continue until the 1980s. Despite the economic depression of the 1930s, the company's sales increased from £2,400,000 in 1929 to £23,400,000 in 1939.<sup>15</sup>

Speaking at the annual general meeting of the company in 1931, Marks and Spencer chairman Simon Marks announced that 'the future holds out great opportunities, and I think that we shall achieve even better results in the years to come'.<sup>16</sup> Rees assessed Marks' optimistic interwar outlook in his commissioned research, arguing that:

This confidence was not the effect of a blind faith in the future. It was based on a belief that the chain-store method of retailing, which did for distribution what large-scale production has done for manufacture, could effect large economies in its cost ... it could provide the basis or a new relationship between the retailer and the manufacturer which would lead to further economies in production costs and to reductions in price.<sup>17</sup>

Focussing on the relationship between the company and its suppliers, Rees argued that 'it was this principle which was above all responsible for its success in the inter-war years'.<sup>18</sup> The importance of this was again stated in an assessment of the company's contemporary business practices in 1985, where K. K. Tse stated that Marks and Spencer acted as a 'manufacturer without factories'.<sup>19</sup> The status of the company as a multiple retailer with a somewhat unusual relationship with its suppliers was due to the exacting product specifications which typified their

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<sup>15</sup> Judi Bevan, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer: - and How It Rose Again*, p. 30.

<sup>16</sup> 'Marks & Spencer, Ltd.', *The Times*, 20<sup>th</sup> May 1931.

<sup>17</sup> Rees, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>19</sup> K. K. Tse, *Marks & Spencer: Anatomy of Britain's most efficiently managed company* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1985) p. 4.

contracts with manufacturers, their enforcement of strict hygiene and quality standards and investment in research and developments. However, in focusing on the retailer-supplier interface, both Rees and Tse failed to pay sufficient attention to the significant relationship between Marks and Spencer and its customers. This thesis explores some of the issues raised by Rees and Tse concerning the retailer-supplier relationship but situates them within the specific context of the retailer-consumer interface, which serves to enrich our understanding of wider British social history rather than the narrow focus of offered by a study of supply.

In order to understand the importance of Marks and Spencer in the history of retail and consumption in twentieth-century Britain, it is first necessary to establish the scale of their retailing operation. As early as 1939, the company was being described by its shareholders as a ‘national institution’.<sup>20</sup> It had 234 stores in 1940, rising to 245 in 1970 and 252 by 1975.<sup>21</sup> In 1968 12,000,000 customers shopped at their stores each week.<sup>22</sup> It remained, for the most part of the twentieth century, a family-run company despite becoming publicly listed in 1926. Until the 1980s the company’s chairmen were either family members or employees who had spent their entire careers at the company.<sup>23</sup> The two most significant individuals in the company’s history as a retailer of food were Simon Marks, who was the chairman between 1916 and 1964, and Nathan Goldenberg. Goldenberg was appointed as ‘Technical Executive and Chief Chemist to the Food Division’ in 1948 and played a pivotal role in shaping the company’s food retailing practices. Annual food sales

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<sup>20</sup> ‘Marks and Spencer Limited’, *The Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1939, p. 24.

<sup>21</sup> Bevan, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer: - and How It Rose Again*, p. 311.

<sup>22</sup> Rees, p. 232

<sup>23</sup> Michael Marks (1884 - 1907), William Chapman (1907 - 1916), Simon Marks (1916 - 1964), Israel Sieff (1964 - 1967), Edward Sieff (1967 - 1972), Marcus Sieff (1972 - 1984).

began to be reported separately from total sales in 1960. In that year the company's total turnover was reported as £148,023,000. Food turnover was £24,500,000, which represented just 16.5 per cent of total turnover. By 1969 total turnover was £317,300,000, with food accounting for £86,840,000 of this. In just nine years, the company's food retailing had grown to over 27 per cent of total turnover. By 1980, the company's total turnover stood at £1,543,505,000. Food sales had increased to £520,997,000, which accounted for 34 per cent of the total.<sup>24</sup> Thus, food became increasingly important to the company in terms of its volume of sales. It also became a facet of the business through which Marks and Spencer was able to establish a reputation as a trustworthy retailer of quality products which offered consumers both choice and value for money. By 1981 the company was selling half a million chickens each week,<sup>25</sup> which increased further to one million a week by 1985.<sup>26</sup> These figures give some indication of the growth of the company's food retail operations between 1950 and 1980, as Marks and Spencer's retailing of food became increasingly significant to both the company itself and to British consumers.

One of the key strengths of the company's business archive are sources which run continuously throughout the period, which enable an analysis of long-term patterns, changes and continuities. The company published statements made by its chairmen during the annual meetings with shareholders, known as the 'Chairman's Reviews'.

These annual statements by the chairmen were also made publicly available in the *The Times* and the *Economist* after the meetings had taken place, where the

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<sup>24</sup> Figures from MSCA, open shelf bound sources: *Chairman's Reviews at Annual Meetings from the Incorporation of the Company 1926 to 1967* (London: Marks and Spencer Limited, 1968) and *Reports and Accounts from 1968 to 1985* (London: Marks and Spencer Limited, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> 'Chicken goes oriental', *St Michael News* (December, 1981) p.1.

<sup>26</sup> Tse, *Marks & Spencer*, p. 2.

statements were published as part of the newspapers' review of annual meeting reports and statements of publicly listed companies.<sup>27</sup> They are available in the company archive as bound volumes on open-access shelves: *Chairman's Reviews at Annual Meetings from the Incorporation of the Company 1926 to 1967* and *Reports and Accounts from 1968 to 1985*. These statements were relatively high-level and lacking in specific details, due to their purpose as a summary of the company's work over the previous year. They framed the experiences of the company in a distinctly positive manner, due to their nature as a presentation to the company's shareholders.<sup>28</sup> These statements by the chairmen of Marks and Spencer are a vital primary source for the purposes of this research project, as they span the entire period and provide an insight into the decision making process at the highest levels of the company. They also give a sense of how the company wished to be viewed by its shareholders and the wider public. Ultimately, they are noteworthy for the continuity of the values of affordability, choice and quality in informing the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer as a food retailer and in understanding how the company conceived of the motivations and desires of their customers. The core principles of the company with regard to its relationship with consumers were being articulated in the chairman's reviews as early as 1927:

We believe that in a business such as ours the good will of the public is of paramount importance, and by constantly studying the needs of the public for articles within our prices levels and striving to give it the best possible values,

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<sup>27</sup> For example see: 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1958; 'Marks and Spencer, Ltd.', *Economist*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 1951. Other companies with AGM reports published in the same issue of the *Economist* included Dunlop Rubber Company, Monsanto Chemicals Ltd and the Anglo-Palestine Bank Ltd.

<sup>28</sup> The annual meetings are now referred to as Annual General Meetings (AGMs). These are meetings held every year for shareholders to attend. In the UK, it is a legal requirement for companies to hold AGMs. Further information about Marks and Spencer AGMs can be found at [corporate.marksandspencer.com/investors/shareholder-information/agm-information](http://corporate.marksandspencer.com/investors/shareholder-information/agm-information) [accessed online on 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2014].

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as well as adequate service, we shall create an ever-increasing body of customers who will regard our stores as places where they can receive quality, value and service.<sup>29</sup>

Another source which runs throughout the period is *St Michael News*. This was an in-house publication for Marks and Spencer's staff, from the boardroom to the shop floor, which announced news about the company, its employees and its retailing practices. The company was acutely aware of the potential readership of this publication, which should be borne in mind when considering the audience for *St Michael News* articles. In an article entitled 'Who reads the NEWS?' in 1961, the company reported on a survey it had carried out which assessed the publications' readership. The article explained that 'according to a recent pilot survey most copies of *St Michael News* are read by at least six people in addition to the individual sales girl who receives it'.<sup>30</sup> As well as these long-running sources, there is a wealth of material in the archive which is valuable for exploring the relationship between the company and its customers within the context of its food sales. These sources are wide ranging in both scope and type and include audio-visual training videos, minutes from meetings and original packaging. One of the most important areas of the archive for this thesis is the food research papers of Nathan Goldenberg. These include sources such as product specifications, journal articles, reports on food research and development and policy documents.

There are a number of limitations when using a business archive. In part, this is due to the nature and function of business archives as repositories of material collected to

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<sup>29</sup> 'Marks & Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1927, p. 19.

<sup>30</sup> 'Who reads the NEWS?', *St Michael News* (January, 1961) p. 2.

meet specific aims. Often, sources are stored in order to meet legal requirements or to present a positive image of the company. Within the Marks and Spencer business archive, there is a particular challenge associated with restricted access to certain types of material. This includes sources which are considered to be commercially sensitive or confidential. For example, shop floor plans for the company's stores have been preserved in the archive but are not available for researchers to view due to concerns over security.<sup>31</sup> There are also some continuous sources which are of value to researchers but have not been preserved in their entirety. This is the case for the company's checking lists, where sales data was recorded weekly for each store. These checking lists were used, first and foremost, to monitor sales and stock.<sup>32</sup> However, chapter 1 finds that these lists were also the main method by which Marks and Spencer gauged changes in consumer demand. Full checking lists have survived for certain periods, including 1939 and 1984, but the majority are not available in the archive. Another challenge is presented by undated material and incomplete cataloguing of information around sources. In these instances, it is necessary to make an educated guess about the potential date range of the items.<sup>33</sup> However, the challenges and limitations presented by the archival material have proven to be an asset to this research. Engaging with this variety of primary archival materials and contextualising them both within the sources that run throughout the period and non-business sources, such as contemporary press coverage and governmental reports, has served to enrich the analysis and flag up links and parallels which might not

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<sup>31</sup> It is presumed that this is due to security issues regarding their stores. The company have been the target of terrorist attacks in the past, most notably the bombing of their store in Manchester Arndale Centre in June 1996. See 'Bombing leaves tainted Sinn Fein out in the cold', *The Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1996, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> These are held as the E13 series of sources in the archive. For example, see MSCA, E13/3/23-24, 'Checking List' (1984).

<sup>33</sup> For some of the undated material used in this thesis the company archivists have helped to date sources using contextual information, such as staff members referred to in the text and the physical location of the file in the company archive.

otherwise have been observed.

Chapter 1 explores the nature of the relationship between the company and consumers and looks at how the company perceived of their customer base. However, the company archive serves first and foremost as a valuable source of information about how the company perceived of itself and its retailing practices. This was set out most clearly in a report entitled ‘Operation Simplification’ which was written by B. W. Goodman, the vice chairman of the company, in February 1966. Goodman stated:

The whole business philosophy of Marks and Spencer, the keynote of which is quality and simplicity, can be summed up in these principles:-

1. Offering the public a selected range of high quality foods at reasonable prices, eliminating ruthlessly departments and lines which stand in the way of fast-selling merchandise or fail to maintain ‘St Michael’ standards;
2. Applying science and technology to the development and improvement of ‘St Michael’ goods;
3. Enforcing the highest standards of hygiene and cleanliness and every safety precaution in the interests of our staff and customers;
4. Simplifying all operating procedures and ranges of goods;
5. Last, but not least, fostering good human relations with customers, suppliers, staff and the community at large.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> MSCA, E7/21, B.W. Goodman, F.C.A., Vice Chairman Marks & Spencer Limited, ‘Operation Simplification’, 11<sup>th</sup> February 1966, p.1.

As will be seen in this thesis, the retailing principles articulated by Goodman in 1966 served to continually shape the company's practices until the 1980s. Marks and Spencer saw itself a purveyor of quality products, as is evident in sources in which the company reflects upon its image. A key example of this can be found in the chairman's speech of 1955:

Our brand name 'St Michael' is accepted as a hall-mark of quality and taste. It is one of the best known and most popular trade marks and our goods are appealing to an ever-increasing number of customers. We concentrate much effort in creating these values and services which have won the confidence of our public. We shall strive to maintain their goodwill – an asset which we cherish most highly.<sup>35</sup>

Thus, the company was keen to position itself as a trustworthy retailer which was held in high regard by British consumers. This was a perception which is also found in media coverage about the company during the period in questions. For example, an article in *The Times* in 1982 reflected upon the differing fortunes of Marks and Spencer and Woolworths and explained that 'it takes time to build a high quality image such as Marks has'.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, the British media also perceived of the company as a retailer with a largely middle class customer base, particularly towards the end of the period in question. In the same article in *The Times*, it was noted that:

Marks has benefitted from its largely middle-class clientele and has been less affected by the recession... Marks, whose food retailing accounts for 38 per

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<sup>35</sup> 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1955, p. 15.

<sup>36</sup> 'Marks sparks and Woolworth wanes', *The Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> May 1982, p. 19.



cent of store sales, has cleverly exploited the more occasional, luxury buying of customers.<sup>37</sup>

However, the issue of class was not in the vernacular language of the company. There are no sources in the company's archive which refer, either specifically or obliquely, to the demographic of their customers with regard to class. Rather, the company was successful in developing a vocabulary of the Marks and Spencer brand which went beyond boundaries such as class and which thus allowed it to appeal to different social classes, genders and ages of consumers. By striving to create a language of customer relations which transcended class, the social history of Marks and Spencer's food retailing operation parallels that of the cultural developments that D. L. LeMahieu charted in relation to print and broadcast media. LeMahieu argued that the 1930s were 'a crucial decade in the emergence of a culture that transcended the usual boundaries of class, region, and other determinants of aesthetic taste'.<sup>38</sup> He found that the development of technologies which facilitated media and mass communications was central to the emergence of a 'common culture' in the interwar period.<sup>39</sup> These arguments may be expanded upon within the context of this thesis and applied to the retail practices of Marks and Spencer, particularly with regard to food. The company was attempting to operate at a level that straddled the worlds of high and low culture. Whilst elitists struggled against a culture that measured success by popularity rather than aesthetic merit, LeMahieu suggested that the culture of the emerging middle ground had aesthetic merit. Similarly, Marks and Spencer's food

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> D. L. LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy: Mass Communication and the Cultivated Mind in Britain Between the Wars* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988) p. 4.

<sup>39</sup> LeMahieu, *A Culture for Democracy*, p. 233.

retail strategy was to provide products which had levels of quality and taste that surpassed most of what had been consumed by urban working people in the pre-war period, even if it fell short of the quality of luxury groceries from Fortnum and Mason or fine dining at the Ritz. In the commercial sphere many companies attempted to appeal to both high and low cultures, often developing differentiated product ranges which appealed to either a more discerning middle class market or a more popular mass market. Retailers often followed these divisions, with companies such as Woolworths appealing directly to the mass market whilst John Lewis was pitching its products at more affluent middle class tastes. Marks and Spencer was effective in its navigation of both, hence its reputation as a ‘national institution’, as will be discussed in chapter 2.

The emphasis on the progressive dimensions of advances in food technology thus allowed Marks and Spencer to redefine its relationship with its customers while building on its cultural role as a ‘national institution’. As well as developing a vocabulary which transcended potential social divisions, the company was able to utilise its retail strategies in order to present itself as the champion of the consumer cause in a manner reminiscent of a beneficent paternalism that mirrored the relationship it attempted to foster with its employees. This meant that Marks and Spencer was able to rely less on the traditional forms of commercial ‘propaganda’ used by other multiple retailers, such as print advertising. Instead, it was able to communicate with its customers through general interventions about the meaning of the company, as well as reaffirming the company’s distinctive identity through its commissioned histories. The company also utilised political interventions about consumer protection, hygiene and food regulation to engage with British consumers

and closely monitored sales figures of the product enhancements it gradually introduced. In this sense the company was engaged in a less overt but nevertheless powerful and effective form of communication with consumers through a more general discussion of what Marks and Spencer meant and stood for.

Finally, to return to the starting point for this thesis, it is valuable to ask whether the company itself regarded this period as being marked by change or continuity. A source held in the research papers of Nathan Goldenberg sets out what the food development department considered to be the major areas of change in their retailing practices from 1950- 1981. The report, entitled ‘The Changing Role of Technology’, was written by multiple employees and was based on presentations made to the company’s board of senior executives. Mr A. Griffiths, a member of Marks and Spencer’s food development team, provided the following table as a summary of the changes in food retailing:

**Figure 1**

**Source:** MSCA, Q/Q5/36/4, presentation to the Board by Mr A. Griffiths, ‘The Changing Role of Technology’, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1981, p. 7.

	<b>1950 - 1960</b>	<b>1970 - 1981</b>
<b>The ‘Food’ Business</b>	National Ambient Low product innovation	International Ambient/chilled/frozen High product innovation
<b>Manufacturers</b>	Small Little technology High % M&S	Large High technology Low % M&S
<b>Technology</b>	Craft concentration Procurement base Commercial Predictive	Less concentration Secondary procurement Less ‘commercial’ Reactive

This table set out what Marks and Spencer considered to be the most significant changes affecting its retailing practices and its relationships with both suppliers and technology. The relationship between Marks and Spencer and their customers is conspicuous by its absence. The omission of the role of consumer behaviour in shaping the company’s food retail strategies will now begin to be rectified in chapter 1.

## Chapter 1 - Mediating the market

In order to understand the areas of change and continuity in the social history of food consumption in the mid-twentieth century, it is first necessary to explore the nature of the relationship between retailers and their customers. This relationship is at the interface of the histories of production and consumption. Marks and Spencer was engaged in an ongoing process of negotiating the complexities of food production, distribution and supply-chain management and responding to the changing behaviour and demands of consumers. The success of food retailers depended upon their ability to implement retailing strategies which allowed them to mediate between these supply-push and demand-pull factors. In her discussion of the role of ‘fashion brokers’, such as shopkeepers and retail buyers, the American business historian Regina Lee Blaszczyk argued that they served as ‘fashion intermediaries’, navigating the complexities of production and supply and driving forward product innovations which met the changing fashions and tastes of consumers.<sup>40</sup> This chapter argues that Marks and Spencer played an integral role in the social history of food in twentieth-century Britain not just as an intermediary in increasingly complex food supply chains, but as dynamic and innovative mediator of supply and demand. Utilising retailing innovations to navigate the complexities of food supply chains, alongside its understanding of the demands and behaviour of their customers, made strong commercial sense for the company.

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<sup>40</sup> Regina Lee Blaszczyk, *Imagining consumers: design and innovation from Wedgwood to Corning* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000) p. 12.

The major facets of the relationship between the company and their customers will be carefully considered in this chapter. They are organised into themes which either support or oppose the idea of Marks and Spencer as a dynamic intermediary of food supply and consumer demand in the twentieth century. The issues which challenge the validity of this concept include the absence of formal market research during this period, the company's continued conceptualisation of its customers as housewives and an unsupportive governmental structure, with the policies of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food (MAFF) often at odds with the needs of both consumers and food retailers. On the other hand, there are issues which support the idea of Marks and Spencer as a skilled mediator of consumer behaviours and food supply. The company was able to influence public policy at a decision-making level and had close ties with governmental departments in advisory capacities. This facilitated a two-way transfer of knowledge and enabled it to play an active role as an advocate of consumer interests, operating at the forefront of food retail developments. The company was well-positioned to take advantage of two different public priorities during this period: the country's accession to Europe and campaigns for national self-sufficiency through the purchasing of products manufactured in Britain. Finally, it will be seen that quality was a key facet of both the company's retail practices and how it perceived of itself as a retailer. The majority of sources in the Marks and Spencer company archive which discuss consumer behaviour directly indicate that the issue of quality was a significant element in how it interpreted the demands of its customers. However whilst researchers from management studies have argued that Marks and Spencer had 'a peculiar aversion to marketing',<sup>41</sup> this chapter finds that this was simply not true. As

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<sup>41</sup> K. Mellahi, P. Jackson and L. Sparks, 'An Exploratory Study into Failure in Successful

will be seen, the company was successful in marketing itself and communicating with customers through alternative means, such as within the political sphere. It was therefore engaged in a powerful form of communication through which it was able to articulate the company's values and meaning in very public settings.

This relationship between Marks and Spencer and its customers was by no means straightforward or linear in nature. It was being negotiated both in the long term, with continued improvements in food quality establishing its reputation as a trustworthy and respected retailer, and on a case-by-case basis, with the company considering itself to have acted as an advocate, promoting the interests of consumers within the context of governmental policy-making. Fine and Leopold discussed the challenges presented to researchers when attempting to understand the social history of food consumption through a supplier- consumer nexus in their 1993 text *The World of Consumption*. They argued that:

changing food products and eating habits are not the simple consequence of manufacturers' intentions nor the competitive pressures upon them. Equally, however, nor are they the exercise of consumer sovereignty, in which changing lifestyles around work and home are the independent origins of the convenience and other qualities slavishly supplied by the food system.<sup>42</sup>

Fine and Leopold have articulated here the difficulties inherent in any analysis which attempts to investigate the intricacies of the relationship between supply-push and

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Organizations: The Case of Marks & Spencer', *British Journal of Management*, vol. 13 (March, 2002) p. 18.

<sup>42</sup> Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold, *The World of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 1993) p. 166. Ben Fine published an updated version of this text as the sole author in 2002. See Ben Fine, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2002).

demand-pull in the history of consumption. Focussing in on one retailer and exploring how it navigated the complexities of food supply chains, therefore, provides a valuable framework for these discussions, as Jessen and Langer found that ‘the retail trade played a key role [after 1945] as the link in the chain between producers and consumers in the emerging mass consumption society’.<sup>43</sup>

One of the most striking areas of continuity in the retailing strategy of Marks and Spencer throughout this period is the absence of any formal market research into the desires and behaviours of their customers. This issue appears to stand at odds with the argument that the company was playing an instrumental role in mediating and interpreting the demands of their customers. It is even more unusual when one considers the context in which this strategy was created. The 1930s and 1940s had seen rapid developments in the use of data collection and the recording of public opinion, first in America with the introduction of the Gallup Poll and later in Britain with the work of Mass Observation, who compiled intelligence reports for the Ministry of Information at the start of the Second World War.<sup>44</sup> Marks and Spencer’s strategy to refrain from commissioning market research was set forth in a training bulletin sent to management staff in their stores in 1949. The bulletin noted that investigations into consumer preferences through market researching tools such as polling were common place in America and recognised the importance of knowing what customers thought about the products the company was selling. However, it explained to store managers that:

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<sup>43</sup> Jessen and Langer, p. 5.

<sup>44</sup> For example see the National Archives, INF 1/292, ‘Home Intelligence weekly reports’, 1940 – 1944. The INF files at the National Archives contain the archives of the Ministry of Information, a wartime ministry with responsibilities for propaganda and publicity.



in Marks and Spencer it is simple. In our 230 stores we have a ready made miniature Gallop Poll or Mass Observation – sampling stations which can do simple research into customers’ habits and tastes without any complicated machinery. Because of our special links with manufacturers, the information we gain can be used quickly and simply to modify lines according to customers’ reactions.<sup>45</sup>

These bulletins to management were written in a jovial tone and the ‘sampling stations’ referred to here would appear to be a reference to sales information of what consumers were buying in Marks and Spencer stores. This source illustrates that the company was aware of the burgeoning market research techniques that were being used to gain information about consumers but was actively choosing to avoid this approach. Its stance on not conducting formal market research into consumer behaviour and opinion continued throughout the coming decades, despite the increasing pace of changes to the market in which it was operating.

The store checking lists and sales figures served as the primary incoming channel of communication with regard to gauging changes in consumer behaviour. This can be seen in way that Marks and Spencer read consumer demands for quality food products in the 1960s. In his chairman’s speech in 1960, Simon Marks drew directly upon information on sales figures to assess the importance of quality to consumers when he declared that ‘the growth in the volume of business clearly demonstrates that we have given satisfaction to our customers’.<sup>46</sup> In 1961 Marks again argued that increasing sales were ‘the best evidence of the public’s increasing appreciation of the

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<sup>45</sup> MSCA, K4/12, ‘Training News Bulletin’ insert in ‘Staff Management News’ (September, 1949) p. 1.

<sup>46</sup> ‘Marks and Spencer Limited’, *The Times*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1960, p. 23.

high quality and freshness of our foodstuffs'.<sup>47</sup> The issue of quality will be returned to in the final section of this chapter. In an oral history interview conducted as part of the British Library project 'Food from Source to Salespoint', Cathy Chapman, who had worked as a food technologist at Marks and Spencer during the 1970s and 1980s, explained that:

We didn't do any market research when I was at M&S. I think the official answer was 'our customers are our market research' and we would know within a week if we had a seller or not. Because there was a huge trust and they just picked it up or they didn't. If they didn't pick it up it meant they didn't like the idea. If they picked it up they did like the idea and if they came back for it they liked the product. It was as simple as that.<sup>48</sup>

Chapman's interview confirms that, at least until the 1980s, Marks and Spencer was not conducting formal market research and was instead relying on its sales data as the primary information through which it interpreted the behaviour of its customers.

This idea of the company's sales as their own market research was publicly declared by Simon Marks in an article in *The Times* in 1961, where he also explained his perception of the role Marks and Spencer played in supply chains. Discussing the company's textile work with the Imperial Chemical Industries company, Marks expressed his own interpretation of the role of company in this regard: 'How could Marks and Spencer, as retailers in close touch with the public, learn what scientists were doing, and how could we apply that knowledge to the improvement of the

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<sup>47</sup> 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1961, p. 23.

<sup>48</sup> BLSA, 'Food from Source to Salespoint', Cathy Chapman, oral history interview conducted by Polly Russell, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2004, F15665, tape 2 of 4, side A.

goods we were selling in our stores?’<sup>49</sup> With their textile retailing, Marks clearly saw the company as the crucial link between industry and consumers, explaining that ‘the producer of new fibres is seldom in close contact with the needs and taste of the ultimate consumer’. He thus saw its role as being a mediator of scientific advancement on the one hand and the changing tastes of customers on the other. Marks explained the knowledge-transfer process in which the company was engaged: ‘we were able to offer Marks and Spencer as a market research and advisory organization capable of trying out new products in the quickest and most effective way possible in our own stores’.<sup>50</sup> In a study of the company, K. K. Tse agreed that ‘to satisfy the customer, the retailer must assume the role of *interpreter* to industry of the demands and tastes of the market’.<sup>51</sup> It may be suggested, therefore, that the company did not engage with formal market research because it regarded the use of its own sales data as a superior method of assessing consumer opinion. Marks’ article thus serves to support the view that the company was acting as a dynamic intermediary, using its own retailing strategies to negotiate both technological advances in food supply and the changes in the demands of consumers.

However, one of the most revealing sources about the company’s attitude towards both market research and their understanding of customer desires with regards to food is an undated report on their research and development into poultry products. The report discusses fresh chicken and ‘prepared dishes’, which suggest that it was written in the late-1970s. R. L. Stephens, an employee in the company’s food

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<sup>49</sup> Sir Simon Marks, ‘How Contact is Kept with the Consumer’, *The Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> May 1961, p. ix.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. ix.

<sup>51</sup> Tse, p. 29.

development department, articulated their philosophy toward both market research and consumers with surprising candour:

Research into consumer preference seems to have little practical value. People generally do not know what they want until they see what they get. Commercial organisations carry out market research for reasons which they no doubt consider sound, but it is not proposed in this paper that further academic studies into the nature and reason for preferences should be a priority.<sup>52</sup>

From this source it may be interpreted that Marks and Spencer did not see itself as a mediator, responding to changes in consumer behaviour. Rather, it perceived its role as being instrumental in shaping the consumption practices of its customers. The company was not conducting formal market research because it did not consider knowledge of consumer preferences to be valuable in driving retailing practices and development of food products. A charitable interpretation might be that the company's emphasis on entrepreneurship and product innovation over and above understanding the specific desires of its customers may be taken as an indication of its confidence in the trust that consumers had in them and the products it was selling, alongside the business acumen of their head office staff. This was certainly how the issue was framed publicly, with a publicity film recorded in 1976 explaining that 'surprisingly they indulge in little market research before launching new lines. Theirs is largely an intuitive gut reaction.'<sup>53</sup> However, with regard to understanding the company's relationship with their food customers, the primary material available concerning their attitude toward formal market research would suggest that Marks and Spencer did not see itself as mediating consumer behaviour, but actively

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<sup>52</sup> MSCA, Q5/17/16, R. L. Stephens, 'Priorities in Poultry Research and Development: Poultry Research and the Consumer' (c.1979) p. 3.

<sup>53</sup> MSCA, P11/5/1, 'The Gospel According to St Michael', DVD (1976) 20:24.

attempting to shape it through its continued focus on the progressive dimensions of advances in food technologies.

A key issue which challenges the idea of Marks and Spencer as an intermediary between food consumption and food supply was the long-term conceptualisation of the company's customers as 'housewives'. This term was used repeatedly by the company throughout the twentieth century when conceiving of the motivations, preferences, desires and behaviours of consumers. It can be found in almost all areas of the company's food retailing, from the research papers of the food department, audio-visual material, annual reports and *St Michael News*, which indicates the pervasive nature of this conception of 'housewife-consumers' in the organisation. Engaging with the primary material which uses gendered language also highlights a significant methodological challenge posed by using business archives to explore consumer history, as many of these sources are not dated. This makes the exact chronology difficult to explore, but the continuity of the language used minimises the disadvantage around the dates of the primary materials and an educated guess can often be made by drawing upon factors such as the staff involved in the research papers and the quality and aesthetics of the footage and the products being shown in visual sources.

Referring to consumers as 'housewives' suggests a number of assumptions were being made by Marks and Spencer about the lives and experiences of its customers: they were presumed to be female, married, without full time employment and were often assumed to be mothers. A clip of early film footage which shows in-store food

preparation and display is undated but can be judged to be from the 1950s, as it predates food wrapping technologies and the primary products being sold are baked goods such as cakes. This is a rare example of Marks and Spencer broadcasting its food retailing practices to the public through film and, whilst unfortunately there is very little information surrounding the tape, it would most likely have been intended as a cinema advertisement. The food preparation area of a store is shown, with cakes arriving and being prepared by Marks and Spencer employees by being sliced and wrapped. A female customer is seen in the food department of a store, taking a piece of cake to be weighed by an employee. The voiceover of the footage states that ‘each week over one million housewives come to our stores to buy our cakes and every week that number increases’.<sup>54</sup> The customers shown in this source are almost exclusively female, as are the employees serving them.

Marks and Spencer was explicitly using this gendered understanding of its core customer when it spoke internally about consumer desires and behaviours. In the minutes of a meeting about fish products, it was explained that ‘pre-cooked fish which the housewife re-heats or cooks will be of an inferior quality due to the double cooking’.<sup>55</sup> An undated research paper into poultry development, likely to have been written in the 1970s as it describes poultry as being less popular than red meat, shows how the company was understanding the hierarchy of demands affecting food purchasing decisions by their ‘housewife’ customers: ‘As red meat becomes more and more expensive we can expect poultry based dishes to become more attractive to

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<sup>54</sup> MSCA, P10/1/555, ‘Marks & Spencer: Compilation’, compilation tape, 1 & 2 St Michael cake, VHS (c.1950s) 00:55.

<sup>55</sup> MSCA, Q5/18/24, R. M. Allison, ‘Minutes of meeting discussing the bacteriology of fish and fish products’ (undated) p. 3.

the housewife'.<sup>56</sup> Marks and Spencer was aware of the sensitivity to price exhibited by customers and was shifting its retail practices in response to this potential change in the consumption habits of its customers, all the while conceiving of consumers in these strictly gendered terms. The chairmen of the company also considered food consumers in this manner. A speech by Marcus Sieff to the company's Board in 1960 clearly identifies the emergence of convenience as an important factor in its food development work whilst maintaining that same definition of their customers:

We are developing a number of lines which are simple for the housewife to prepare, e.g. Apple Pie, Canned Rice Pudding, Steamed Puddings, washed and prepacked New Potatoes, Lettuce and Carrots.<sup>57</sup>

Thus whilst the idea of 'housewives' was a constant feature in the way in which Marks and Spencer discussed its customers, the perception of the behaviour and demands of these 'housewives' was changing over time. The growing demand for convenience was reiterated and expanded upon in the company's rhetoric surrounding consumer behaviours throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Ideas of convenience became increasingly sophisticated and developed alongside technological advances in food processing. The company focussed on increasing the levels of processing involved in the manufacture of the products stocked in its stores. This strategy was rooted in their continued focus on the application of food technologies and served the dual aims of making these products more convenient for customers to consume in the home and increasing the potential profit margins. By 1985, the development of food products which offered time-savings to customers was seen as ranking alongside quality, value and variety as key principles of the

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<sup>56</sup> Stephens, 'Priorities in Poultry Research and Development', p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> MSCA, Q5/40/4/1 - 5, Marcus J. Sieff speech to the Board, 'Appreciation of the Food Division' (April, 1960) p. 2.

company's food retailing practices. The emergence of convenience as a major factor influencing the behaviour of consumers will be discussed further in chapters 5 and 6. In the 1985 chairman's review Marcus Sieff proclaimed that 'the strength of the food division is our insistence on the use of top quality raw materials made into recipes which are easy for the housewife to cook and serve'.<sup>58</sup> Thus even in the mid-1980s, the narrow, gendered terms in which Marks and Spencer conceived of their core customer base was consistent with the language used in the immediate post-war period and, to a certain extent, echoed the democratic language of consumption used by the company since that time.

In their consideration of the safety issues of implementing new technologies in food preservation and packaging, the company used these assumptions about housewife-consumers to gauge potential risks. A research report into new boil-in-the-bag kippers stressed that 'housewives may regard the vacuum pack as a sterile pack and, therefore, keep the product longer than normal'.<sup>59</sup> Similarly, the research paper on poultry development drew attention to the need to assess the public health risks to the 'housewife' when considering the use of innovative processing and product packaging:

Valuable research has been carried out on the bacteriology of poultry processing and distribution. This has a direct bearing on the condition of the housewife's purchase and should be continued. Improved rapid techniques for

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<sup>58</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1985, p. 8.

<sup>59</sup> Allison, 'Minutes of meeting discussing the bacteriology of fish and fish products', p. 1.



routine checks of the bacteriological condition of poultry during and after processing would be of value.<sup>60</sup>

Thinking about its customers in these strict gendered terms when considering potential risks could have posed an issue for the company, as the knowledge-base and ways in which its products were used by other consumers may not have been fully appreciated in their analysis of the possible food safety issues. However, the company did not have any major public health crises between 1950 and 1980, which was testament to its rigorously enforced hygienic food policy alongside their investment in food development research. These retail practices will be discussed further in chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis.

The longevity of this conceptualisation of consumers by the company stands at odds with the findings of historians such as Matthew Hilton, whose research into female consumers in Britain found that a transformation occurred in public constructions of consumer identity in the early twentieth century. Hilton argued that by the 1950s the definition of ‘consumers’ in official contexts, such as the Molony Committee and subsequently established Consumer Councils, had shifted from earlier ideas of middle-class housewives ‘and on to a gender-neutral category of the rational consumer which embraced the post-war affluent male’.<sup>61</sup> Hilton found that gender-neutrality emerged as the prevailing paradigm in the definition of consumers in certain public arenas, such as in the work of the Consumers’ Association. Marks and Spencer’s engagement with the Molony Committee will be discussed in detail later in this chapter. However, the endurance of ideas of housewife-consumers in food

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<sup>60</sup> Stephens, ‘Priorities in Poultry Research and Development’, p. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Matthew Hilton, ‘The Female Consumer and the Politics of Consumption in Twentieth-Century Britain’, *The Historical Journal*, vol. 45, no. 1 (March, 2002) p. 127.

retailing into the 1980s suggests that either the history of food consumption was different from the broader experience of consumers in the twentieth century with regards to gender constructs or that Marks or Spencer was unusual in its continued conceptualisation of consumers in these terms. A valuable extension of this study would be to explore the terms in which other British retailers conceived of the gendered nature of food consumption during this period.

An important issue in understanding the relationship between Marks and Spencer and its customers, and the extent to which the company acted as a mediator of consumer desires within wider networks of food supply and distribution, is the political context in which this relationship was being negotiated. During the mid-twentieth century British food production policies privileged intensive agricultural practices over the needs of both retailers and consumers, spurring on a drive towards cheap food. Within this political context, the company was keen to communicate that its interests were strongly aligned with those of consumers. This allowed it to present itself as a champion of the consumer cause in a manner that mirrored the beneficent paternalism that it attempted to foster with its employees. The company was then able to utilise its political influence in order to mediate British food policy on behalf of consumers, acting as advocates on issues which aligned with their own interests, such as food quality and safety. Marks and Spencer was able to utilise the flexibility of its relationship with suppliers and investments in food development to differentiate itself within the food market and drive forward changes which were perceived as being in the interests of their customers. The company fostered close ties with government at an advisory level and was able to wield this influence to

shape the landscape of food retailing on a number of issues.

The politics of production and agriculture in Britain between the 1950s and 1980s were shaped by the 1947 Agriculture Act. The two key aims of this act were to stimulate British agricultural output and to establish stable, subsidised prices:

The following provisions of this Part of this Act shall have effect for the purpose of promoting and maintaining... a stable and efficient agricultural industry capable of producing such part of the nation's food and other agriculture produce as in the national interest it is desirable to produce in the United Kingdom, and of producing it at minimum prices consistently with proper remuneration and living conditions for farmers and workers in agriculture and an adequate return on capital invested in the industry.<sup>62</sup>

As a result, this legislation enacted a policy which promoted intensive agricultural production with an emphasis on price over quality. There is agreement within the scholarship on this issue that the Agriculture Act of 1947 served almost as a reward for British farmers' efforts in wartime and allowed agricultural interests groups, most notably the National Farmers' Union, to take a prominent role in British policymaking for the decades ahead. J. K. Bowers described this policy as having started a 'wearying dash for growth in agricultural production' and David Grigg noted that by 1970 the largest twenty per cent of farming businesses were receiving seventy percent of support from government subsidies.<sup>63</sup> Malcolm Chase has argued that 'the only unequivocal beneficiary was the farmer – not the government,

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<sup>62</sup> *The Agriculture Act 1947* (London: HMSO, 1947) chapter 48, part 1, section 1.

<sup>63</sup> J.K. Bowers, 'British Agricultural Policy since the Second World War', *Agricultural History Review*, vol. 33 (1985) p. 76; David Grigg, *English Agriculture: an Historical Perspective* (London: Basic Blackwell, 1989) p. 25.

consumer, landworker nor, one might add, the environment'.<sup>64</sup> There is a consensus that twentieth-century British agricultural policy did not prioritise the needs of consumers and was instead focused on promoting the interests of increasingly intensive and large-scale farming operations.

Within government the day-to-day and long-term responsibility for this policy fell under the remit of MAFF. Formed in 1955 as the result of an amalgamation of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and the downsized Ministry of Food, MAFF was responsible for both food production and food safety. Before its creation, the potential dual function which MAFF was to serve was flagged up as an untenable remit for one ministry. During a debate in prime minister's questions on the future of the Ministry of Food in October 1954 Clement Attlee, the leader of the Labour Party and thus of the Parliamentary Opposition, voiced his concern that these two responsibilities ought not to fall under the same minister:

May I ask the right hon. Gentleman whether he gave consideration to the point that the Ministry of Food was essentially placed there to protect the consumer and has now been joined with the Ministry of Agriculture? Is not the amalgamation rather like that of the young lady and the tiger?<sup>65</sup>

Attlee's reference to an allegorical story about an unsolvable problem with an impossible decision to be made painted a stark picture about the inherent incompatibility of MAFF's dual function. This exchange in the House of Commons was indicative of the gravity of the issue at this time. Indeed, Attlee's warnings about

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<sup>64</sup> Malcolm Chase, "Nothing Less Than a Revolution?": Labour's Agricultural Policy', in Jim Fyfe (ed.), *Labour's High Noon: The Government and the Economy 1945 - 51* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1993) p. 80.

<sup>65</sup> HC Deb 19 October 1954, vol 531, col 1032.

the tensions and risks which would arise from the scope of MAFF's remit were to be continuously repeated over the subsequent decades. By the 1980s these critical voices were heard, with increasing frequency, from food retailers themselves. In May 1989 Sir Dennis Landau, Chief Executive of the Co-operative Wholesale Society, echoed Attlee's mid-century sentiments in the *Guardian* newspaper. Although he stopped short of calling for a wholesale separation of the responsibilities of MAFF, Landau stressed the importance of splitting the dual function between different ministers:

I do not propose the breaking up of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food. But we must end the idea that MAFF exists in the main to meet the requirements of the National Farmers' Union. Though I head the organisation which is Britain's biggest commercial farmer I have never believed that agriculture should be the ministry's chief preoccupation. MAFF must contain a senior minister whose job it is to represent both consumer and food industry interests and to ensure that correct information reaches the industry and its customers.<sup>66</sup>

As with Attlee, Landau saw the joint responsibility for both agricultural production and consumer interests as an incompatible remit for one government ministry. Furthermore, he articulated a public perception of MAFF as being heavily influenced by large agricultural interest groups, notably the National Farmers' Union.

A more recent example of the continuity of criticism comes from a 1996 discussion paper at the Centre for Food Policy at Thames Valley University, in the aftermath of the BSE crisis. Academics at the centre had been vocal proponents of a division of

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<sup>66</sup> 'Thatcher is urged to appoint Food Minister', *Guardian*, 31<sup>st</sup> May 1989.

the responsibilities of MAFF and heavily criticised the Ministry's inability to work for consumer interests. The paper called for a wholesale reform of MAFF:

It is now clear to all but the most avid of MAFF's supporters that the Ministry is weighed down by a set of contradictions which can only be transcended by reform of its remit, its mechanisms and its internal culture. These contradictions are rooted in the fact that MAFF is charged with sponsoring and regulating industry and that it is supposed simultaneously to promote commerce, yet respond to consumer demands, notably for sound public health.<sup>67</sup>

Once again, the wide remit of MAFF was seen as a wholly unworkable scope to be contained in the responsibilities of one government ministry. The subordination of consumer demands and public health to the interests of the UK's powerful farmers and agribusinesses resulted in public health crises which benefitted neither of the groups MAFF had been tasked with representing. Whilst the major public health crises of the latter twentieth century are beyond the scope of this research (the BSE outbreak and scare over salmonella in eggs occurred in the mid- and late-1980s) it is important to be aware of the tensions which existed in the political sphere. It was within this contemporary mind-set of anxiety over whether the needs of consumers were being neglected, both with regards to public health and to food quality, that the relationship between Marks and Spencer and its customers was being established.

Within this context, Marks and Spencer perceived of its role as mediatory: it was negotiating British agricultural policy on behalf of their customers and positioning itself at the forefront of the food industry on issues such as food safety and quality.

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<sup>67</sup> Tim Lang, Erik Millstone, Hugh Raven and Mike Rayner, 'Modernising UK Food Policy: The Case for Reforming the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food', discussion paper for the Centre for Food Policy at Thames Valley University (July, 1996) p. 3.

The work of the company's employees in negotiating the political framework of food supply chains, and situating this within the company's perception of consumer demands for quality products, was a defining feature of their success in food retailing. The final chapter of this thesis explores this in detail with a case study on the development of chilled ready meals. However, there are several aspects of the company's experience in poultry retailing which serve to illuminate this discussion. Derek Oddy has discussed the intensification of the agricultural output of livestock and the battery production of poultry in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>68</sup> As a result of these innovations in livestock production, facilitated and sanctioned by MAFF, food technologists at Marks and Spencer were able to develop products which utilised the advancements made in cold-chain distribution for the sale of fresh chickens in the 1960s.<sup>69</sup> The company was thus navigating and negotiating agricultural policy by focussing on progressive food technologies in order to establish its status as a reputable and trustworthy food retailer. It was taking the political context of British agriculture and using it to set itself apart from other retailers. The material available in the company's archive suggests that it did so by carefully reading what it perceived as a growing public taste for quality, as opposed to the homogenising process arising from the cheap food policy being enacted by agribusinesses under MAFF. However, within the wider framework of this thesis it will be seen that the company was successful in utilising its public engagement with British policy issues in order to communicate with consumers about what Marks and Spencer stood for.

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<sup>68</sup> Derek Oddy, *From Plain Fare to Fusion Food: British Diet from the 1890s to the 1990s* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2003) pp. 169 - 171.

<sup>69</sup> MSCA, P11/5/3, 'Fresh not Frozen', DVD featuring Sun Valley Chickens in Hereford (1960).

The senior management of the company were acutely aware of the impact that agricultural policies which promoted intensive farming practices were having on food retail and distribution and voiced this publicly during the 1970s. Speaking at a marketing conference organised by the NFU and Agricultural Co-operation and Marketing Services in 1974, Marcus Sieff surmised that ‘the agricultural industry is changing. Units are becoming larger, more mechanised and often require more sophisticated management’.<sup>70</sup> Sieff saw price controls, the mechanisms for which had been included in the 1947 act, as being detrimental to the business of food retail. During a speech at the Co-operative College in 1974 he drew comparisons between the two retailers and outlined the ways in which unsupportive governmental and bureaucratic structure had impeded upon their business practices. He argued that:

Successive Governments, in their unsuccessful attempts to slow down inflation, have put many burdens on managements. These are now greater than anything experienced since the war. They include controls of prices and margins, statutory and voluntary margin reduction as well as additional taxation on company profits.<sup>71</sup>

He went on to put forward the view that ‘the present Government discriminates against the retailer, whose contribution to the economy is often not understood by those who advise ministers on economic and fiscal policy’.<sup>72</sup> However, this source must be considered in light of the connections the company had with government at an advisory level. He may have been keen to emphasise the similarities between the two retailers during this speech, seeking solidarity and actively choosing not to

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<sup>70</sup> MSCA, CR/B/4/1/55, Marcus Sieff, ‘Copy of a talk by Marcus Sieff at the NFU/ACMS Marketing Conference’, 21<sup>st</sup> January 1974, p.1.

<sup>71</sup> MSCA, CR/B/4/1/65, Marcus Sieff, ‘Retailing: A look at the future conditions and responses’, speech at Co-operative College, Loughborough, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1974, p. 3.

<sup>72</sup> Marcus Sieff, ‘Retailing: A look at the future conditions and responses’, p. 3.



discuss the special relationship that Marks and Spencer had developed with governmental departments over the previous decades.

This began in the interwar period, with Simon Marks being invited to join the Re-organisation Committee for Egg and Poultry producers by the Minister of Agriculture and Fisheries.<sup>73</sup> The company went on to engage in processes of knowledge-transfer with governmental departments in a number of areas, the most notable of which being food safety and public purchasing. Perhaps the most high profile engagement with government came in 1970 with the appointment of Derek Rayner, one of the company's directors and who later became Chairman, as a business adviser to Edward Heath's Conservative government. His role was to share best practice from his experiences at Marks and Spencer and translate this into the context of government purchasing and procurement. *The Times* reported that:

This is not the first time that the Government has looked to Marks and Spencer in reappraising public purchasing. Three years ago, four civil servants, from the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Technology and the Stationery Office, spent seven weeks at M. and S. studying purchasing methods in the stores groups.<sup>74</sup>

The value of Rayner's knowledge of the company's centralised merchandising process, where purchasing decisions were made by groups at their Baker Street head office, and their involvement with the production and development of every product sold in their stores continued to be recognised by subsequent conservative

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<sup>73</sup> MSCA, R/3/1/3/1, 'Letter of invitation from Walter Elliott of the Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries to Simon Marks', 25<sup>th</sup> September 1933.

<sup>74</sup> 'Marks & Spencer's purchasing policy-lessons for Whitehall', *The Times*, 5<sup>th</sup> August 1970, p. 21.

governments. He went on to undertake larger scale inquiries into public sector purchasing and efficiency strategies, appointed by Margaret Thatcher in 1979 to 'identify waste and inefficiency in government'.<sup>75</sup> In 1982 it was announced in the *Guardian* that Rayner's scrutiny of civil service procedures had 'identified possible savings of £300 million a year'.<sup>76</sup> This transfer of knowledge between the public and private sector went both ways and, after becoming Chairman of Marks and Spencer, Rayner carried out an investigation into the policies and procedures of the company. These scrutiny reports identified areas for improving efficiency and cost-effectiveness, such as contracting out their distribution centres and eliminating waste.<sup>77</sup>

Of greatest significance for the consideration of the company's relationship with food consumers was the appointment of Nathan Goldenberg, the chief chemist and head of food technology at Marks and Spencer, to the Food Additives and Contaminants Committee (FACC).<sup>78</sup> Goldenberg sat on this committee, which had been set up by MAFF, between 1964 and 1975. In his autobiography, he explained that he acquired 'know-how' from the Agricultural Development Advisory Service Extension Service of MAFF, particularly with regard to their research on fruit and vegetables. However, Goldenberg very publicly steered the company away from one of the committee's policies: the use of cyclamates, a synthetic sweetener which had

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<sup>75</sup> 'Officials meet to prune spending', *Guardian*, 17<sup>th</sup> September 1979, p. 24.

<sup>76</sup> 'Rayner renews Civil Service scrutiny', *Guardian*, 14<sup>th</sup> July 1982, p. 2.

<sup>77</sup> MSCA, CR/C/2/42/1, 'The Chairman's Scrutiny: the Warehousing Operation' (April, 1987).

<sup>78</sup> Nathan Goldenberg, *Thought for Food: Study of the Development of the Food Division, Marks and Spencer* (Orpington: Food Trade Press, 1989) p. 218. Goldenberg appears on the report Committee list as late as 1978. For example see Food Additives and Contaminants Committee, *Report on the Review of Nitrites and Nitrates in Cured Meats and Cheese* (London: HMSO, 1978) p. 2.

been ruled as safe by the FACC. The danger of cyclamates was front page news in 1969.<sup>79</sup> Goldenberg was directing the company's food policy in the opposite direction to that of the government: pre-emptively banning their use until their safety was sufficiently proven, rather than using cyclamates until they were proven to be harmful. Reflecting on this issue in 1977, he stated: 'I think it was wrong to permit cyclamates in the first place, but the committee did permit them'.<sup>80</sup> In 1968 Marks and Spencer gave the official line to *The Times* that 'our chief chemist takes the view that the second one [of the FACC reports on cyclamates] has not yet fully resolved the question of the toxicological properties of cyclamates'.<sup>81</sup> The company was joined in this rejection of cyclamates by other retailers including Sainsbury and Waitrose. Marks and Spencer's leading role in this issue was highlighted in a quote to the *Guardian* from an unnamed large retailer: 'When Marks and Spencer cough, we all go and have our chests examined'.<sup>82</sup>

Goldenberg's involvement with the FACC served to further exemplify the position of the company in the British food industry as a retailer with a prominent voice in official discussions on food safety. The FACC reports contain a list of all the organisations that made representations or gave information to the investigations. Marks and Spencer are frequently listed, often as the sole food retailer among a list of manufacturers. For example, it was the only food retailer to give information to the FACC report on the regulation of colouring matter in 1973 and to make

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<sup>79</sup> 'Cyclamates to be banned in Britain', *Guardian*, 24<sup>th</sup> October 1969, p. 1.

<sup>80</sup> 'Britain told not to panic over saccharin', *The Times*, 24<sup>th</sup> March 1977, p. 8.

<sup>81</sup> 'Cyclamates ban until doubts are cleared', *The Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 1968, p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> 'Cyclamates and Mr Cube', *Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1968, p. 6.

representations to the 1982 report on sweeteners in food.<sup>83</sup> The precise reason why Marks and Spencer was the only food retailer involved in each of these reports is not explained either in the reports themselves or in the primary material held in the company's archive. It may have been the result of factors such as Marks and Spencer's supply-chain dynamics, with its stocking of only own-brand products, leading it to take a particular and exacting interest in food safety and public health. Its involvement may more directly be understood as the result of both Goldenberg's work with the FACC and the company's investment in food research and development. Whilst the motivation behind Marks and Spencer's direct involvement in the FACC reports is unclear, what emerges from these sources is a sense of the company taking its responsibility for food safety seriously and contributing to policy-setting debates. By participating and engaging with the wider food industry through these channels, it was communicating to consumers that it was an authority on food safety issues. The company was able to use these official platforms to position itself as an advocate of consumers' concerns. As with cyclamates, the company was very vocal about its opposition to genetically modified foods and was one of the first British food retailers to remove these products from their stores in the 1990s.<sup>84</sup>

The parallels between the experiences of Marks and Spencer in the twentieth century and the co-operative societies in the nineteenth century will be discussed in chapter 4 of this thesis, in relation to their roles in promoting food safety and hygiene. A

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<sup>83</sup> Food Additives and Contaminants Committee, *Interim Report on the Review of the Colouring Matter in Food Regulations* (London: HMSO, 1973) p. 24; Food Additives and Contaminants Committee, *Food Additives and Contaminants Committee Report on the Review of Sweeteners in Food* (London: HMSO, 1982) p. 19.

<sup>84</sup> 'Marks & Spencer pulls GM products off shelf', *Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1999, p. 2.

worthwhile extension of this study would be to explore whether Marks and Spencer's policy of actively promoting product safety in these public forums was unique amongst food retailers at this time. The company can be seen to have been using the interactions between their employees and governmental bodies to attempt to set itself apart from the rest of the industry and establish a role as an advocate of consumer interests. This served to strengthen the reputation of Marks and Spencer as a leading food retailer that was actively ahead of public health issues, using the skills and experiences of their personnel to improve the safety of their food products. By engaging with governmental departments and challenging food policies in this way, the company was communicating to consumers that it was prioritising the health of their customers in its retailing practices, something which the 'lady and the tiger' dilemma prevented MAFF from doing themselves.

Marks and Spencer publicly welcomed the advancement of consumer protections in the mid-twentieth century and was keen to ally itself the findings of the Molony Committee. Established in 1959, the Molony Committee, and the subsequent publication of the 'Molony Report on Consumer Protection' in 1962, was one of the key developments in consumer protections during this period.<sup>85</sup> The committee's function was outlined in a contribution by Baroness Burton of Coventry during a sitting of the House of Lords in 1962 as being:

to review the working of the existing legislation relating to merchandise marks and certification trade marks and to consider and report what changes in the law

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<sup>85</sup> Board of Trade, *Final Report of the Committee on Consumer Protection* (Molony Committee), Cmnd. 1781 (London: HMSO, 1962).

and what other measures, if any, were desirable for the further protection of the consuming public.<sup>86</sup>

Simon Marks, in his position as Lord Marks of Broughton, was a vocal participant in this debate in the House of Lords.<sup>87</sup> He welcomed the findings of the committee but, in his critique of the report, was quick to position Marks and Spencer at the forefront of consumer protections and criticise the Molony Committee for not going far enough, particularly with regard to foodstuffs. He explained that in his view it was ‘the function of the enlightened retailer, in concert with the suppliers, to protect the customer against inferior quality goods’.<sup>88</sup> One of the proposals made in the report, the creation of a ‘Consumers’ Council’ intended to be representative of and give a voice to consumer interests in British policy-making, was criticised by Marks in a dismissive tone:

The noble Lady spoke of a sum of £35,000 that had been made available for research on the part of the Consumer Councils, or whatever it was, and believed that it would not go very far. My own firm allocated some £600,000 to the development of quality merchandise.<sup>89</sup>

Marks went on to lament the recommendations for the advancement of consumer protections with regard to foodstuffs. It had been stated in the report that existing legislation and mechanisms, such as the Food and Drugs Act, 1955 were of ‘a most comprehensive nature’ and that was ‘difficult to conceive of more far-reaching provisions and powers’.<sup>90</sup> Marks said:

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<sup>86</sup> HL Deb 14 November 1962, vol. 244, cc. 605 - 25.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., cc. 653 - 718.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., cc. 654 - 655.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., c. 655.

<sup>90</sup> *Final Report of the Committee on Consumer Protection*, para. 9.

I regret that the Committee have not given attention to problems which fall within the scope of the Food and Drugs Act, 1955. None of the reasons they give is, in my opinion, good enough for avoiding some expression of view in a field where the consumer must be specially protected. In the few paragraphs which appear in the Report there is no mention of quality foods, or of hygiene and cleanliness, either in the factories producing foods or in the shops which sell them to the public.<sup>91</sup>

The nature of Marks and Spencer's hygienic practices will be explored in detail in chapter 4 but what is noteworthy here is the strong criticism expressed by Marks and the way in which he was clearly attempting to communicate to consumers that the company was operating at the very forefront of consumer protections. He argued that the report presented 'only half, or less than half, the picture on consumer protection. There are many progressive food manufacturers and retailers who have set their sights at a level much higher than called for by present legislation.'<sup>92</sup> Whilst Marks was not explicit about the 'progressive food manufacturers and retailers' to which he was referring, it may be inferred with confidence that Marks intended for his contribution to the House of Lords debate to be a public declaration of the important role that he felt his company was taking in representing and advancing the interests of consumers.

A copy of this House of Lords debate is held in the chairman's papers in the Marks and Spencer company archive (Simon Marks' speech was covered in handwritten notes) with a document written the day before the debate summarising the report's

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<sup>91</sup> HL Deb 14 November 1962, vol. 244, c. 655.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., c. 656.

stance on foodstuffs.<sup>93</sup> In the company's annual meeting the following year, chaired by Israel Sieff due to the ill health of Marks, the 'Molony Report on Consumer Protection' was discussed. Sieff situated his discussion of the report within the company's retailing strategies:

The [Molony] Committee drew attention to the importance of correct labelling of garments and that it was necessary to state the kind of materials used and their special characteristics, so that the customers would know what they were buying. This is our normal practice. We know that our customers are most discerning and discriminating and their trust can only be earned by satisfaction with the goods they buy. We prize their goodwill which we regard as one of our greatest assets.<sup>94</sup>

In the public setting of this meeting with shareholders, the transcript of which was made available in *The Times* and the *Economist*, Sieff can be seen to have been deliberately positioning the company as consumer advocates: implementing retailing strategies which promoted the interests of consumers and did not immediately benefit the company financially. Matthew Hilton has studied the importance of the Molony Committee within the wider history of consumer politics in the post-war period, arguing that the committee was instrumental in placing 'the "consumer", rather than the more general "public", at the centre of political debate'.<sup>95</sup> This point will be returned to in chapter 2 as part of the discussion on the wider changes in consumer history in the twentieth century. Hilton explained that the pace of change of certain aspects of British retailing in the post-war period, such as the rapid

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<sup>93</sup> MSCA, R/4/2/4, 'Extract from speech by Lord Marks of Broughton at the House of Lords', 14<sup>th</sup> November 1962.

<sup>94</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1963.

<sup>95</sup> Matthew Hilton, 'Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain' in Martin Daunt and Matthew Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption: Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America* (Oxford: Berg, 2001) p. 243.



proliferation of choice, created difficulties for consumers. This impacted on the ability of consumers to make expert judgements about what to buy from the ever-increasing variety of products available and in the face of ever-more sophisticated marketing and advertising methods. Consumers, Hilton argued, ‘needed advice in determining personal and individual preferences in order to avoid returning home with a product unsuited to her or his needs’.<sup>96</sup> He pointed to organisations such as the Consumer’s Association as fulfilling the role of providing objective guidance which facilitated the ability of consumers to make informed decisions about their consumption choices. However, Simon Marks’ contribution to the House of Lords debate in 1962 and Israel Sieff’s speech in 1963 show that Marks and Spencer was publicly attempting to establish a role for itself as a major advocate of consumer interests and protections in the public sphere. In affiliating the company with the recommendations made by the Molony Committee, and criticising the report for not going far enough to protect consumers with regard to foodstuffs, the company was communicating to consumers that it was operating at the forefront of the developments in consumer protections: mediating this political context on consumers’ behalf. Marks and Spencer’s approach to issues of consumer protection and food safety was thus to both ally itself with, and indeed go further than, changes in both government and industry regulations and to emphasise the centrality of consumer interests in its public-facing communications.

This strategy of publicly positioning the company in alliance with wider campaigns which corresponded with both its retailing strategies and consumer interests was exemplified in its policy of using British manufacturers. Marks and Spencer’s

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<sup>96</sup> Hilton, ‘Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain’, p. 248.

statements about the British provenance of their products were a continuous theme in their public-facing communications. In the long-term, the company was able to utilize this position to tap into the core values at the heart of these declarations: ideas of nationhood, citizenship and national pride. Throughout the twentieth century there were public campaigns to encouraging the public to purchase goods produced in Britain which were often reactionary and relatively short-lived as, Roodhouse has argued, ‘patriotism is a powerful but ephemeral motive for action’.<sup>97</sup> The need for further study into these campaigns was highlighted by Benson in his study of consumer society in Britain.<sup>98</sup> The ‘Buy British’ campaign, launched in November 1931, was managed by the Empire Marketing Board, who encouraged the public to ‘buy first the produce of the home country, and next the produce of the Empire oversea’.<sup>99</sup> The campaign was an attempt to tackle a crisis in the balance-of-payments in the interwar period. One million posters were sent out, intended for window displays, and national and local associations such as the Federation of British Industries and the Boy Scouts were urged to spread the message of the campaign. Stephen Constantine’s study into the campaign found that the operation ‘had only a limited and temporary impact’.<sup>100</sup> Similarly, the ‘I’m Backing Britain’ campaign of 1968 was a reaction to the economic depression which had set in during the late-1960s, with the devaluation of the pound and decline in British manufacturing. This campaign, which was begun by five typists in Surbiton who offered to work an extra half an hour pro bono, was brief but achieved a high profile and press coverage, culminating in a song by Bruce Forsyth with the refrain:

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<sup>97</sup> Mark Roodhouse, *Black Market Britain, 1939 - 1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p. 237.

<sup>98</sup> John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880 - 1980* (London: Longman, 1994) p. 234.

<sup>99</sup> ‘Buy British’, *The Times*, 6<sup>th</sup> November 1931, p. 7.

<sup>100</sup> Stephen Constantine, ‘The Buy British Campaign of 1931’, *Journal of Advertising History*, vol. 10, no. 1 (1987) p. 44.

I'm backing Britain,  
Yes, I'm backing Britain,  
We're all backing Britain.  
The feeling is growing,  
So let's keep it going,  
The good times are blowing our way.<sup>101</sup>

Sandbrook has described the campaign as both a 'national sensation' and an 'acrimonious failure'; highlighting the impact this had in Westminster, with Harold Wilson and Edward Heath quick to praise the movement, and the fierce opposition by trade unions.<sup>102</sup> Marks and Spencer contributed to the 'How to Help Britain and Yourself' campaign, which took out advertisements in newspapers such as full page of *The Times* in February 1968.<sup>103</sup> The adverts offered tips and advice on how to stimulate the British economy through personal behaviours and choices, tailored to different professions: '2 things a docker can do'; '3 things a factory worker can do', etc. Whilst keen to publicly ally itself with these 'buy British' campaigns, a more complex process was taking place with regards to the company's buying policies and the way in which these were influenced by consumer demands.

The proportion of the company's products which were manufactured in Britain declined significantly during this period. In the first speech to shareholders, after Marks and Spencer became a public company in 1927, Simon Marks declared that:

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<sup>101</sup> 'Business Diary', *The Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1968, p. 19.

<sup>102</sup> Dominic Sandbrook, *White Heat: a History of Britain in the Swinging Sixties* (London: Abacus, 2006) pp. 609 - 611.

<sup>103</sup> Advert for the 'How to Help Britain and Yourself' campaign: 'Whatever you think of them, surely you think enough of your country to choose 6 practical things to help Britain get out of the red', *The Times*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1968, p. 3.

We purchase in this country practically 90 per cent. of our requirements. It is our aim and object to get as much produced in this country as possible, and the efforts of our buyers are constantly being directed to this cardinal principle of our business.<sup>104</sup>

Marks reflected upon this in his chairman's speech to shareholders in 1958, arguing for the longevity of buying British-made products in the retail strategies of the company: 'We have followed these principles ever since, so that to-day we can state with pride that over 99 per cent. of our manufactured goods are still made in this country.'<sup>105</sup> However by 1982, the company was sourcing only 90 per cent of its products from Britain.<sup>106</sup> The extent to which this change was at the same pace as other Britain retailers would be an interesting area of future research and it may be the case that Marks and Spencer maintained a British supply base for a longer period of time than its competitors.

Primary material from the company's food research department suggests that these figures may obscure the company's retailing practices and the way in which it interpreted the demands of consumers in its food buying strategies. Whilst the chairman's speeches give the impression that Marks and Spencer viewed itself as having a responsibility to maintain links with British manufacturers, in its food retailing operations it was application of progressive food technologies, ostensibly in the pursuit of variety and quality, which guided the company's buying policies, rather than any sense of philanthropic support to the British food industry.

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<sup>104</sup> 'Marks & Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1927, p. 19.

<sup>105</sup> 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 1958, p. 17.

<sup>106</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1982, p. 6.

Material in the Marks and Spencer archive which charts the company's investment in the production and distribution of fruit and vegetables from other countries is thus important for a number of reasons. Firstly it illustrates that whilst the company was publicly 'backing Britain' in the 1960s, from the 1950s onwards their food buying policy had been increasingly international in outlook. Understanding the role of Marks and Spencer as a dynamic intermediary in this context, and particularly as an interpreter of consumer demands, this would suggest that for British consumers the importance of buying British products was significantly less of a priority than other factors influencing their purchasing decisions. The absence of sources in the company archive which discuss consumer demands for British-made products would suggest that variety, value, quality and, increasingly, convenience took greater precedence in influencing consumer behaviours. Moreover, the archival material illuminates the extent to which the company was focussing on the application of advances in food technologies in order to navigate and, to a certain extent, shape consumer preferences.

The sourcing of fresh produce from non-British producers began in the early 1950s, with an article in *St Michael News* in January 1954 declaring that oranges were now an 'all-the-year-round fruit', even whilst food items were still being rationed.<sup>107</sup> In 1953 an article proclaimed: 'No one else in the world can offer a tomato service like we do. For the first time in the history of fruit distribution in this country, tomatoes are in the stores within 36 hours of their leaving Holland'.<sup>108</sup> In the 1960s the company began to source tomatoes from the Canary Islands to ensure they were

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<sup>107</sup> *St Michael News* (January, 1954).

<sup>108</sup> *St Michael News* (July, 1953).

available to British consumers throughout the year. Their detailed product specification shows how this supply of tomatoes was controlled, with exact sizing of the products and precise instructions for the transportation of the goods. Tomatoes from the Canary Islands were to be one of two sizes, 42 - 47mm or 47- 57mm, and to be transported on aircraft or refrigerated ships maintained at 8 - 10°C and 85 - 90 per cent humidity.<sup>109</sup> One of the effects of this change in the buying practices of Marks and Spencer was the reduction of seasonality as a determining factor in the availability of food products. This is an issue which demands further analysis in future research in order to understand the company's role within the wider context of British food retailing. However, within this discussion these sources illustrate that the company was using its continued focus on food technologies in order to diversify its supply base, deliver both variety and quality, and further redefine its relationship with consumers.

A sense of the geographical spread of the company's supply base can be seen in figure 2, which shows a reproduction of a table which appeared in a food development report on canned new potatoes in 1967. This set out the various suppliers from which the company purchased new potatoes for canning and showed the volume of stock which was being bought from each supplier. Whilst Goldhanger was a British-owned firm, the table shows that the majority of Marks and Spencer's new potato supplies were coming from raw material produced overseas.

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<sup>109</sup> MSCA, Q5/21/8, 'Canary Tomatoes (Summary of Specification)' (August, 1968).

**Figure 2**

**Source:** MSCA, Q5/20/5, 'Canned New Potatoes', 14<sup>th</sup> March 1967, p. 2.

M&S PRODUCTION 1966			
Period	Raw Material Origin	Supplier	£ S. V. <sup>110</sup>
March – April	Morocco	Goldhanger	35,280
May	Sicily	“	33,490
June	Jersey	“	8,720
“	Jersey	Schweppes	9,200
“	Jersey	Norfolk Canneries	2,700
September	Sweden	Bjare	75,000
			<b>134,390</b>

This focus on quality over and above the maintenance of a mainly British supply base is an important issue in this investigation of Marks and Spencer's role in the social history of food in twentieth-century Britain. Quality was a value in which the company's work in negotiating the supply-push and demand-pull factors of supplier innovation and consumer behaviour was keenly felt. In 1974 Marcus Sieff drew a direct link between the company's increasingly international buying practices and the quality of their products:

<sup>110</sup> Although this abbreviation is not explained in the source itself, '£S.V.' is mostly likely to have been an abbreviation of 'supplier value', indicating the volume of stock which Marks and Spencer purchased from each supplier.

it is our policy to buy British whenever possible, and this applies as much to agricultural produce and processed foodstuffs as it does to textiles. It is only when we cannot get the quality we seek in the U.K., that we look abroad.<sup>111</sup>

Sieff's comments, which were made during his speech at the conference on marketing organised by the NFU and Agricultural Co-operation and Marketing Services, show that whilst the company was keen to put forward the public image of itself as a food retailer that was 'backing Britain', quality was a more important principle in its retail strategy. This had been articulated in the chairman's speech to shareholders as early as 1931, when Simon Marks said that 'the marketing of imported butter will not encourage the sale of British butter unless the British butter is of better quality than the imported article'.<sup>112</sup> This emphasis on quality in the company's relationship with British suppliers was discussed during the annual meeting in 1966, where Israel Sieff explained that 'in foods, we are trying to convey our ideas and principles to British farmers and food processors so that they can supply quality produce and enable us to buy British foods in increasing quantities'.<sup>113</sup>

The issue of quality was a continuous theme in the Marks and Spencer company archive, particularly in sources which discussed the ways in which company perceived of both itself and consumer demand. The company's definition of the concept of quality was articulated in a quote from Israel Sieff, which appeared in Rees' history of the company:

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<sup>111</sup> Marcus Sieff, 'Copy of a talk by Marcus Sieff at the NFU/ACMS Marketing Conference', p. 2.

<sup>112</sup> 'Imported Butter', *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1931, p. 13.

<sup>113</sup> 'Marks and Spencer', *The Times*, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 1966, p. 18.



The concept of quality embodies attractive and pleasing appearance, serviceability or palatability and consistency in large-scale production. Above all, however, quality implies that people will want to buy the goods and that they will find them satisfactory for their purpose. This is the practical test without which quality would be an abstraction.<sup>114</sup>

Tse has suggested that the company's emphasis on quality went hand-in-hand with their policy of stocking only own-branded products. Making a comparison with retailers which sold products from multiple brands, Tse argued that:

What St Michael offers, in contrast, is the guarantee that the product in question is of high and reliable quality and, if there are different price points for the same type of products, it can be confidently assumed that the one with a higher price possesses some extra benefits of refinements.<sup>115</sup>

Marks and Spencer's strategy of continually improving the quality of their food products was the main retail practice through which the company was able to set itself apart from the market and establish a role for itself in the context of agricultural policies which favoured farmers, rather than consumers. The issue of quality as a major concern for the company pre-dated the 1947 Agriculture Act. It was first articulated by Simon Marks in the second annual meeting with shareholders in 1927, where he explained:

The range of goods which this company offers the public is continually expanding, and we believe we are filling a long felt want in providing sound

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<sup>114</sup> Israel Sieff as quoted in Rees, p. 251.

<sup>115</sup> Tse, p. 30.

quality goods at inexpensive prices, which the public cannot get elsewhere at those prices.<sup>116</sup>

However, it was in the specific context of post-war agricultural intensification that the company's policy of improving the quality of their food products was implemented. Speaking at the annual meeting in 1950, Simon Marks viewed the period as formative for the company's food retailing practices:

We set up recently a development department for foodstuffs with tasks similar in principle to those of the textile development department. It is concerned with the quality of the foodstuffs we sell and with the composition and purity of the raw materials used. It also establishes standards of quality and strives to ensure that these standards are maintained. Our aim is to provide good quality foodstuffs which are wholesome and palatable, and I am glad to say that the public is showing its appreciation of our efforts.<sup>117</sup>

By 1951, the company was investing significantly in food development. Under the leadership of Goldenberg as chief chemist, an in-house laboratory had been set up which allowed the food department to test the quality standards of their food products. Marks explained that 'our technical staff have an up-to-date laboratory for the examination of such raw materials, which are recommended and used only if they reach our standards'.<sup>118</sup> The company viewed its strategy of investing in research as a direct response to consumer demands, with Marks stating in 1956 that 'we aim to satisfy the large and growing demand for quality foodstuffs at reasonable

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<sup>116</sup> 'Marks & Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 28<sup>th</sup> May 1927, p. 19.

<sup>117</sup> 'Company Meeting', *The Times*, 30<sup>th</sup> June 1950, p. 9.

<sup>118</sup> 'Marks & Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 12<sup>th</sup> June 1951, p. 10.

prices'.<sup>119</sup>

Rees has argued that 'the success of Marks and Spencer appeared to demonstrate that quantity is not necessarily the enemy of quality'.<sup>120</sup> This was certainly how the company conceived of the role of quality in its perception of itself and of consumer demands for quality throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Speaking at the annual meeting of 1976, Marcus Sieff used the company's sales figures as evidence that 'our customers increasingly appreciate the high quality standards and good values we offer'.<sup>121</sup> The sources in the company's archive strongly suggest that quality was a continuous and pervasive theme in Marks and Spencer's food retailing practices from the 1950s onwards. It shaped their relationship with suppliers, it was fundamental in how the company perceived of its own position in the British food market and it was one of the primary consumer demands to which it saw itself as responding. Quality was also a key facet of how the company typically viewed its engagement in the political sphere, as evidenced by Simon Marks' contribution to the House of Lords debate on the Molony Report in 1962. In this sense, this investigation of the centrality of quality to the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer lends weight to the argument that the company were functioning as an intermediary in the food system: mediating between the practices of producers, the political context and the behaviour of consumers through the provision of quality products. However, the extent to which quality was a driving factor in the behaviour of consumers remains to be seen. It certainly seems reasonable to suggest that, as standards of living rose, consumers demanded better quality products on which to

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<sup>119</sup> 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 15<sup>th</sup> June 1956, p. 18.

<sup>120</sup> Rees, p. 239.

<sup>121</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1976, p. 11.

spend their disposable income. Within the context of economic growth and prosperity, consumers did not want to purchase more of the same products. They were demanding greater choice and better quality, as will be further explored in later chapters of this thesis. What is perhaps of greater significance was the way in which Marks and Spencer was able to utilise its communications in these public forums in order to define the meaning of the company for consumers. This emphasis on quality, as achieved through its continued focus on food technologies, in the company's public dialogue served to further establish Marks and Spencer's reputation as a trustworthy retailer and a 'national institution'.

This chapter has begun to shed light on the social history of food in the twentieth century by exploring the nature of the relationship between Marks and Spencer, their customers and their suppliers. It has been found that the company operated as a dynamic intermediary, negotiating supply-push and demand-pull factors at the nexus between retailers, suppliers and consumers. The company used public settings such as the political sphere in order to communicate to customers that it was a purveyor of quality food products and an advocate on behalf of consumers on issues such as food safety and quality. It utilised the links and transfer of knowledge between its employees and governmental organisations in order to establish itself within the minds of consumers as a reputable and innovative retailer. However, its conception of its customer base was very narrowly defined throughout the period and the company was reliant upon its own sales data as the primary source of information for reading changes in consumer demands and behaviours. Material in the Marks and Spencer company archive and scholarship which deals directly with its retailing practices indicate that quality was a vital element in the company's food retail

strategy throughout this period, shaping both its perception of consumer demand and its own role within the British food industry. The extent to which this finds reflection in the wider scholarship on consumer history will now form part of the discussion in chapter 2, but it was clearly a continuous and defining feature of Marks and Spencer's retailing practices in the twentieth century.

## **Chapter 2 - Consumer history**

Chapter 1 looked at the relationship between retailers and consumers by approaching this as the interface between histories of supply and histories of consumption. This chapter interrogates the latter and situates the methodological approaches and frameworks of analysis applied in this thesis within the wider scholarship of research into consumer history. Within the context of historical research into consumers in twentieth-century Britain, there are two major changes in the scholarship and both are closely interconnected. The first is the dramatic shift from consumption as an act borne out of necessity, want and the meeting of basic nutritional needs to one of affluence and plenty. Running parallel to this radical transition in the act of consumption itself, historians have argued for the emergence of a ‘consumer society’: a redefinition of the identities, desires and fears of individuals according to their participation in economic activity as consumers of goods and services. Both of these changes, to the conceptualisation of the act of consumption and of consumers themselves, call for an engagement with the way in which the motivations of consumers are understood. Historians of consumption in earlier periods have identified social emulation as the key motivating factor in their understanding of consumer history, but to what extent does this explain the behaviour of consumers in the rapidly shifting context of food consumption in the twentieth century? The arguments for social emulation are too simplistic to fully account for the variety of experiences, motivations and desires which were shaping the behaviours of consumers in the second half of the twentieth century. Instead what emerged was, in a sense, the logical conclusion of the ‘consumer society’. This is the idea of citizen-consumers, with consumption playing a key role both in self-identification and in the

situation of individuals within their relationships to others and their wider communities. Taking this point even further, it is necessary to explore both the politics of consumption and the idea that consumption can become a political act in and of itself. This idea of consumers as political, as well as economic, actors lends legitimacy to the idea of the establishment of a consumer society within the second half of the twentieth century. It expands the terms in which consumers and their behaviours are understood: from being economic actors exchanging money for goods or services to active agents making complex decisions which express their political, social and cultural identities.

In order to understand the consumer side of this interface between a retailer and its customers, it is first necessary to consider how consumers perceived of Marks and Spencer and what the company meant within the context of twentieth-century British consumer history. A sense of the cultural resonance of the company can be ascertained by analysing contemporary discussions of Marks and Spencer in print media and in the political sphere. The phrase ‘national institution’ was frequently used to describe it, which implied not only a sense of the scale of its operations but also a high level of trust by consumers. The use of this phrase began in the late-1930s but it was most commonly employed by journalists towards the end of the twentieth century. An article from *The Times* in 1999 clearly articulated the high esteem in which consumers held Marks and Spencer, explaining that ‘it has been not just a tremendously successful company, but a national institution on a par with the public’s affection with the BBC’.<sup>122</sup> This was again echoed in the ‘State of the

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<sup>122</sup> Sarah Cunningham, ‘Marks & Spencer readies itself for a marketing revolution’, *The Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> March 1999, p. 31.

Nation 2013' report, where online interviews were conducted by the market research company Ipsos Mori for the think tank British Future. Participants were asked which companies and institutions made them proud to be British and four per cent selected Marks and Spencer (with forty five per cent choosing the NHS).<sup>123</sup> Thus, throughout the course of the twentieth century the company had developed into a trusted and important retailer to British consumers.

The earliest appearance of the term 'national institution' in connection with Marks and Spencer appeared in the *Manchester Guardian* on 10<sup>th</sup> May 1939 and came from a speech by the MP and company shareholder Victor Cazalet during the annual meeting of that year. Cazalet exclaimed that:

Through the energy and enterprise of the chairman and his colleagues and the staff Marks and Spencer had become far more than merely a distributing agency; it had become a national institution playing a vital part in the economic life of the people of this country.<sup>124</sup>

The first discussion of Marks and Spencer as a 'national institution' in the British press came from the company itself. This was again seen in the *Observer's* publication of extracts from Lord Sieff's autobiography in 1970, the description for which was: 'In this extract from his book Lord Sieff, President of Marks and Spencer... tells how a penny bazaar became a national institution'.<sup>125</sup> In 1939 Cazalet defined the company as a 'national institution' on the basis of the scale and

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<sup>123</sup> Ipsos Mori poll for British Future, 'State of the Nation 2013', 14<sup>th</sup> January 2013 [accessed online at [www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3111/State-of-the-Nation-2013.aspx](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3111/State-of-the-Nation-2013.aspx) on 24<sup>th</sup> July 2015].

<sup>124</sup> 'Marks and Spencer, Limited', *Manchester Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1939, p. 17.

<sup>125</sup> Lord Sieff, 'The £650,000,000 Penny Bazaar', *Observer*, 18<sup>th</sup> October 1970, p. 15.



profit of their retailing operation. This was echoed in 1991, with an article in *The Times* explaining that:

M&S has become a national institution. It serves 14 million shoppers a week. They buy £5 billion worth of goods a year. We buy 16 per cent of our clothes in M&S, and 5 per cent of our food.<sup>126</sup>

Thus, one facet of Marks and Spencer's reputation as a 'national institution' was its economic importance: the number of British consumers who shopped in its stores, its volume of sales and its market share. It was people involved with the company itself who were most prominently promoting the idea that Marks and Spencer was a 'national institution' in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the introduction of this thesis it was argued that the company was successful in creating a vocabulary which transcended class divides. Press coverage of Marks and Spencer's retail operations found that this ability to span both high and low culture was a key element of its reputation as a 'national institution'. A discussion of the retailer in a 1993 article in the *Economist* argued that:

The identification of Britain with Marks & Spencer is extraordinarily close. Whereas many British institutions are the reserve of a certain class, most Britons have probably visited Marks & Spencer at least once, and 15m do so every week.<sup>127</sup>

By choosing to communicate with consumers using language which appealed to a common culture, and which was increasingly progressive and technologically

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<sup>126</sup> 'The best thing since its own sliced bread', *The Times*, 8<sup>th</sup> June 1991, p. 6.

<sup>127</sup> 'Store of value', *Economist*, 26<sup>th</sup> June 1993, p. 63.

engaged after the Second World War, Marks and Spencer was able to avoid being categorised as a retailer for a particular class of British society. However, retrospective analysis of the company's fortunes at the end of the twentieth century warned that this had created an unusual set of circumstances with regards to its cultural meaning and ability to innovate. Writing in 1999, after the company had seen a decline in profits, Graham Searjeant explained the pitfalls which accompanied the company's reputation:

Marks has become a national institution, so everyone knows what is wrong with it ... One of the mistakes of management is that they raised expectations that M&S could be all things to all people and became deluded by their own glory.<sup>128</sup>

There is a pattern in the press coverage of the 1990s and early 2000s whereby journalists provided retrospective recognition that the company was a national institution that had declined, An exploration of the extent to which the approach that the company successful employed between the post-war period and 1980, tapping into an increasingly progressive common culture using language which transcended class barriers, came to be detrimental to the company's fortune and cultural resonance by the 1990s would be a worthwhile area for future research.

A further important area of contemporary discussion about the cultural meaning of Marks and Spencer during the period in question was in House of Lord debates. The company were frequently referenced by members of the House of Lords and held up as an example of a trustworthy British retailer selling quality products. This began as

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<sup>128</sup> Graham Searjeant, 'Gloomy end of an era on the high street', *The Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1999, p. 59.

early as 1947, where during the discussion of the Electricity Bill in the House of Lords the Earl of Lytton proclaimed that Marks and Spencer and Woolworth's were 'two most successful retail businesses in this country'.<sup>129</sup> The quality of the products sold by the company was a recurrent theme in these discussions. During a debate on quality and reliability in 1966, it was described as the firm 'that really started British industry understanding the true value of quality control at every level of its functions'.<sup>130</sup> The high regard with which Marks and Spencer were held within the political sphere was expressed during the 1967 debate on the grading of fruit and vegetables. During Baroness Burton of Coventry's contribution she held the company up as an example of a retailer who provided high quality food products: 'Let us take as an example Marks and Spencer. I imagine that everybody, not least the Prime Minister, agrees that they offer a consistent standard of quality for their produce.'<sup>131</sup> This viewpoint was agreed upon by Baroness Elliot of Harwood who remarked that the standards the company set for their produce was 'an inspiration to the people who actually produce for them.'<sup>132</sup> Through analysing both contemporary press coverage and House of Lords debates, a picture emerges of the cultural significance of Marks and Spencer both to consumers and those in the political sphere as being a trustworthy retailer with a reputation for selling quality food products. However, during the 1967 debate Baroness Phillips did remark that 'though our admiration for Marks and Spencer is untinged, we must recognise that in this market that firm does not carry a vast percentage of the trade.'<sup>133</sup> Marks and Spencer's significance in British consumer history must therefore be tempered with

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<sup>129</sup> HL Deb 22 July 1947, vol. 15, c. 53.

<sup>130</sup> HL Deb 26 October 1966, vol. 277, c. 359.

<sup>131</sup> HL Deb 24 October 1967, vol. 285, c. 1628.

<sup>132</sup> HL Deb 24 October 1967, vol. 285, c. 1635.

<sup>133</sup> HL Deb 24 October 1967, vol. 285, c. 1641.

both their small share in overall food retailing and the challenges faced by the company toward the end of the twentieth century.

An important starting point, therefore, for situating the specific history of the interface between Marks and Spencer and its customers within the context of wider consumer history is a consideration of what is meant by the term ‘consumer’. The term appeared in Raymond Williams’ seminal *Keywords* text in 1976, a sociological dictionary which sought to define the history and contemporary understanding of key words in cultural theory. Williams explained that consumer and consumption were the ‘predominant descriptive nouns of all kinds of use of goods and services. The predominance is significant in that it relates to a particular version of economic activity, derived from the character of a particular economic system’.<sup>134</sup> In Williams’ description consumers are understood primarily as economic entities: units at the end of a system of production and retail or service provision. This viewpoint was expressed most explicitly by Adam Smith where he declared that consumption was ‘the sole end and purpose of all production’.<sup>135</sup> However, in recent years the scholarship on consumer history has come to recognise consumption as an inherently complex act and consumers as increasingly active entities within economic systems.

The study of consumer history, and its relationship to histories of retail, has undergone a rapid transformation in the last fifty years. Fernand Braudel’s 1967 text on material life in the *ancien régime* was one of the first to establish the history of

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<sup>134</sup> Raymond Williams, *Keywords* (London: Fontana, 1976) pp. 68 - 70.

<sup>135</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Methuen & Co, 1904) [first published in 1776] book 4, chapter 8, p. 49.

consumption, as distinct from histories of retail and supply, as a valid topic in scholarly research within the discipline and highlight the myriad opportunities afforded for insights into the history of capitalist economies through the study of material culture.<sup>136</sup> It was fifteen years until Braudel's 'demand' approach to the history of consumption was applied in the context of English history, with McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb's 1982 volume identifying a 'consumer revolution' in eighteenth-century England.<sup>137</sup> The scholarship on consumer history diverged into two distinct areas in the 1980s, a distinction which has, to some extent, remained to the present day. The first followed McKendrick *et al*'s line of inquiry and sought to identify the 'birth' of consumer culture in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, commonly within the context of Western Europe and Britain in particular and often with a focus on luxury goods. This included research into elite consumption and luxury goods including textiles, clothing and furniture by scholars such as Maxine Berg, Joan Thirsk and Linda Levy Peck. More recently, Jan De Vries has argued for the existence of an 'industrious revolution' in the long eighteenth century.<sup>138</sup> De Vries's work expanded upon the narrow conceptualisation of the industrial revolution as principally productionist, and industrial production in particular, to reconsider the economic activity of households in more holistic terms, including both production and consumption. De Vries argued that his industrious revolution was 'a process of household-based resource reallocation that increased both the supply of marketed commodities and labor [sic] and the demand for market-supplied

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<sup>136</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Capitalism and Material Life, 1400 – 1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973) [first published in French in 1967].

<sup>137</sup> McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*.

<sup>138</sup> Maxine Berg, 'In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century', *Past & Present*, 182 (Feb, 2004) pp. 85 - 142; Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects*; Linda Levy Peck, *Consuming Splendor: Society and Culture in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); De Vries, *The industrious revolution*.

goods'.<sup>139</sup> In an earlier paper published by De Vries and presented at the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Economic History Association, he drew direct parallels between eighteenth-century and modern-day consumption practices. De Vries observed that whilst in the 1990s households no longer functioned as distinct units of domestic production, the rise in demands for market-supplied goods and the shift from 'family-consumed durables toward individualized consumption' was strongly reminiscent of the eighteenth century.<sup>140</sup> Chapter 6 of this thesis finds that the same observation can be made as early as the 1970s in Britain. One of the key achievements of Marks and Spencer's developments in chilled ready meals was their success in drawing upon conceptions of food consumption as an increasingly individualised activity, as evidenced by the single-serving portions of these pre-prepared recipe dishes.

Another area of historical research into consumption which forms a significant theme in the historiography has been studies which look for the roots of twentieth-century mass consumption in the nineteenth century, primarily in European urban areas such as Paris and London. This approach was typified in the work on the history of American consumerism, advertising and mass markets in Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears' edited collection of 1983, *The Culture of Consumption*.<sup>141</sup> Researchers such as Michael Miller, Rosalind H. Williams and Bill Lancaster have sought to understand the democratization of consumption during this period and pinpoint times at which participation in shopping as a form of leisure

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<sup>139</sup> Jan De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 54, no. 2, Papers Presented at the Fifty-Third Annual Meeting of the Economic History Association (June, 1994) p. 249.

<sup>140</sup> De Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', pp. 264 - 265.

<sup>141</sup> Richard Wightman Fox and T.J. Jackson Lears (eds.), *The Culture of Consumption: critical essays in American history, 1880 - 1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983).

activity ceased to be a pursuit of only the elite members of society.<sup>142</sup> Whilst both these areas of research share commonalities, for example with scholarship which explores the place gender as a category of historical analysis,<sup>143</sup> they differ in their methodological and empirical approaches to primary material and their engagement with multi-disciplinary literature. Frank Trentmann has gone so far as to argue that between these two strands of historical research on consumption there exists ‘a disagreement about the very essence of human existence and culture’.<sup>144</sup>

Research into the history of consumption in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries explains the experience of consumers primarily through their acquisition of key goods and services. With regard to food and drink, Lorna Weatherill analysed primary material from probate inventories to argue for the existence of a ‘middling sort’ of consumer who began to own certain ‘landmark’ goods associated with the consumption of tea and coffee, such as chinaware.<sup>145</sup> Consumer behaviours and motivations were understood primarily through the lens of social emulation. This drew on Veblen’s concept of ‘conspicuous consumption’, which first appeared in his

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<sup>142</sup> Michael B. Miller, *The Bon Marché: bourgeois culture and the department store, 1869-1920* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); Rosalind H. Williams, *Dream worlds: mass consumption in late nineteenth-century France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Bill Lancaster, *The Department Store: a Social History* (London: Leicester University Press, 1995).

<sup>143</sup> Amanda Vickery, ‘His and Hers: Gender, Consumption and Household Accounting in Eighteenth-Century England’, *Past & Present* (2006), supplement 1, pp. 12 - 38; Leora Auslander, ‘The Gendering of Consumer Practices in Nineteenth-Century France’ in Daniel Miller (ed.) *Consumption: The History and Regional Development of Consumption* (London: Routledge, 2001) pp. 157 - 189.

<sup>144</sup> Frank Trentmann, ‘Beyond consumerism: new historical perspectives on consumption’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 39, no. 3 (2004) p. 374.

<sup>145</sup> Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660 - 1760*. See also John Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: a Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999).

1899 work *The Theory of the Leisure Class*.<sup>146</sup> Historians such as Neil McKendrick and John Styles have argued for the ‘trickle down’ theory of consumption, fuelled by social hierarchies, with consumers’ acquisition of goods being driven by concerns of display and social status.<sup>147</sup> This view was reflected upon by John Maynard Keynes in 1931, as he categorised need as falling into two classes:

...those needs which are absolute in the sense that we feel them whatever the situation of our fellow human beings may be, and those which are relative in the sense that we feel them only if their satisfaction lifts us above, makes us feel superior to, our fellows.<sup>148</sup>

Keynes thus saw consumer motivations as being either concerned with survival or with social status and display. However, those historians who followed the other route of inquiry and argue for the importance of the nineteenth century as the genesis of modern mass consumption practices have criticised this viewpoint as being founded on weak empirical evidence, rendering the position an ‘untenable hypothesis’.<sup>149</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, with its exploration into the experience of consumers in the second half of the twentieth century, the concept of social emulation as the primary motivating factor for consumption is too simplistic to be considered alone as it fails to account for the wide variety of experiences and desires of consumers. A more suitable, if less neatly defined, theory was put forward by Ben Fine and Ellen Leopold in their discussion of food consumption and dietary choices. Fine and Leopold surmise that the influences on food choice constitute a

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<sup>146</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998) [first published in 1899].

<sup>147</sup> Neil McKendrick, ‘Commercialization of Fashion’ in McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, *The Birth of a Consumer Society*, p. 60; John Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>148</sup> John Maynard Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities for Our Grandchildren’ in *Essays in Persuasion* (London: Macmillan, 1931) pp. 365 - 366.

<sup>149</sup> Fine and Leopold, *The World of Consumption*, p. 142.



‘bewildering array of factors’ including physiological needs and nutritional knowledge.<sup>150</sup>

Advertising and marketing are important factors within this ‘bewildering array’, and have been studied in depth by historians and researchers of British and global business. However, for the purposes of this thesis, it is marketing which is the most pertinent issue. This is because Marks and Spencer rarely used direct advertising during this period. This was particularly true for their food operations.<sup>151</sup> The company was actively promoting and selling their products using a number of other marketing methods, such as in-store displays, packaging and staff training. This will be discussed in further detail in chapter 3 of this thesis. Historians of twentieth-century British consumer culture, such as Stefan Schwarzkopf, have focused on the advertising practices of (often international) consumer goods companies such as Unilever and Procter & Gamble.<sup>152</sup> This analytical approach draws strongly upon the mid-century work of Vance Packard, who argued for the existence of the ‘invisible hand’ of the market in shaping the behaviour of consumers and saw consumers as lacking in agency.<sup>153</sup> The business history approach of engaging with consumer history has typically emphasised the ‘supply push’ drivers in the production-consumption paradigm, prioritising the advertising and marketing practices of retailers and manufacturers above the ‘demand pull’ influence of consumer agency.

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<sup>150</sup> Fine and Leopold, *The World of Consumption*, pp. 167 - 168.

<sup>151</sup> For a rare example of Marks and Spencer advertising their food products, see ‘Marks & Spencer: Compilation’ (c.1950s). This VHS tape contains an advertisement for the company’s cakes that was most likely used as a cinema advertisement.

<sup>152</sup> Stefan Schwarzkopf, ‘Turning Trade Marks into Brands: How Advertising Agencies Created Brands in the Global Market Place, 1900 - 1930’, Centre for Globalization Research Working Paper, Queen Mary, University of London, no. 18 (August, 2008).

<sup>153</sup> Vance Packard, *The Hidden Persuaders* (London: Longmans, Green, 1957).

Marks and Spencer therefore serve as an interesting historical case study for understanding consumer history as the sources held in their archives demand a more investigatory and multi-disciplinary approach in order to explore the experience of their customers, rather than a cultural and aesthetic reading of print and media advertisements. Studying the history of consumers through the primary material available in a business archive therefore offers the opportunity to go beyond the binary understandings of push/pull economic theory and instead explore the complexities of experiences of retailers and consumers alike.

An important issue which emerges from this necessity of engaging with a wider range of sources than straight-forward advertisements is the role of Marks and Spencer and other food retailers in facilitating a process of democratization in the consumption of food in the twentieth century. The company clearly identified this as a key change in the experience of British food consumers and saw itself as playing a significant role in the process of democratization. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) definition of ‘democratic’ provides a useful starting point for the understanding of the democratization of food consumption as being ‘characterized by or favouring social equality; egalitarian; capable of being used, accessed, or enjoyed by anyone’.<sup>154</sup> Democratization is a process of widening participation in the act of consumption, with an ever increasing number of citizens able to engage with the act of food consumption. Marks and Spencer identified this process and situated their retail practices within it during the interwar period. In the chairman’s speech in 1934, it was explained that:

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<sup>154</sup> ‘democratic, adj. and n.’, OED Online, Oxford University Press [accessed online at <http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/49758?redirectedFrom=democratic> on 21<sup>st</sup> November 2014].

## Chapter 2 - Consumer history

If our system has any special merit or makes any marked contribution to the economic life of the country, I would say that it is its ability more and more to satisfy the general and growing needs of the consumers with moderate and lower levels of income. We regard the lowering of prices and the improvement in the quality of our goods as a means for raising the standard of life of large masses of the community. It is the function of the modern distributor to help consumers to purchase with their incomes better and more varied food, healthier and more attractive clothing, in fact to endeavour to satisfy all their reasonable wants at a level which they can afford to pay... By a close study of this problem, together with our suppliers, we have succeeded in converting potential demands for new classes of goods, hitherto beyond the range of the purse of the average shopper, into effective demand.<sup>155</sup>

The company staked a claim for their role as facilitators in this process of democratization in the 1930s, which was to define their position on this issue throughout the twentieth century. It perceived of its food retail operations as being influenced by, and in turn serving to shape, changes in consumer behaviour affected by rising standards of living. Marks and Spencer was not selling food in any substantial volume at this period, so this source primarily relates to their position as a retailer of clothing and other non-food goods. Chapter 3 looks at how, after the establishment of their food technology department in the 1950s, the company began to apply the experiences it had learned in textiles to their food retailing operation.

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<sup>155</sup> 'Marks and Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 18<sup>th</sup> May 1934, p. 20.

Godley and Williams have used the issue of democratization to explore the history of chicken retailing and production, using Sainsbury as a case study.<sup>156</sup> The consumer experience is not explicitly explored in their study but they highlight the role of food retailers in driving down costs and increasing product quality and standardisation. Democratization in this context is primarily concerned with the broadening of access to better quality products and Godley and Williams highlighted the role that food retailers took in driving forward this process. Democratization is thus understood as a retailer-led, as well as consumer-driven, development in food history. Similarly, Ben Fine argued in his exploration of the history of consumption that:

the notion of consumer society is necessarily moved away from the privileges of the few, at least within advanced countries. With or without trickle-down effects, it is mass consumption of mass-produced commodities by the mass of the population which comes to the fore.<sup>157</sup>

In exploring the changes in the experience of consumers in the twentieth century, Fine went so far as to argue for the existence of a ‘consumer revolution’ which has paradoxically:

...served simultaneously to suggest increasing uniformity, even democratization, of consumption and increasing differentiation as particular market segments, whether men or women, rich or poor, young or old, are cast as vanguards of demand, leading the economy forward.<sup>158</sup>

Recognising the process of democratization in consumer history, Fine drew attention to the emergence of distinct sections of consumers within the marketing and selling

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<sup>156</sup> Andrew Godley and Bridget Williams, ‘Democratizing Luxury and the Contentious “Invention of the Technological Chicken” in Britain’, *Business History Review*, vol. 83, no. 2, A Special Issue on Food and Innovation (Summer, 2009) pp. 267 - 290.

<sup>157</sup> Fine, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited*, p. 172.

<sup>158</sup> Fine, *The World of Consumption: The Material and Cultural Revisited*, p. 8.

of products and seemed to see this as an inconsistency within the history of consumption. The democratization of consumption may instead be understood as a process with a threshold, a point of critical mass, rather than an ongoing march of progress.

For Marks and Spencer, the critical period for these discussions was between the world wars. From the post-war period and into the 1980s, the company was not discussing the experience of consumers as one of ongoing democratization. Instead, the focus of both its internal and public communications was more concerned with providing value for money for their customers. The idea that its customers might not be able to engage in certain forms of consumption was not given attention: it was taken for granted that the particular type of food consumption offered in their stores would be accessible to a mass market. Indeed the company came to be seen as synonymous with democratic participation in mass consumption. In 1990 the Conservative MP Teresa Gorman remarked to the *Guardian*: ‘A duchess’s £5 is worth exactly the same in Marks and Spencer as a pensioner’s’.<sup>159</sup> Insofar as the process of democratization is concerned, from the post-war period the attention of the company switched from making the act of consumption more accessible to more people to increasing the variety of products which consumers were able to access. The extent to which this holds true for the experience of British food consumers in the twentieth century is an area which deserves further study.

Attempting to understand the process of democratization of consumption in twentieth-century consumer history using a business archive therefore presents

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<sup>159</sup> ‘The Woman Least Likely’, *Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> December 1990.

challenges and it is important to be aware of the limits of the archive's utility. A prime example of this is the absence of any discussion of male consumers in the discussions taking place at Marks and Spencer about their food retailing operation. Whilst this lends weight to the conceptualisation of food consumption as a gendered activity, with women primarily responsible for food purchasing decisions and management of the household budget, any attempt to understand the social history of consumers using these sources exclusively would neglect the experience of half the population. Similarly, whilst it will be seen that the period 1950 - 1980 saw a rise in living standards for many British citizens, there remain significant sections of society for whom the purchase and consumption of food beyond a level which meets basic nutritional needs (and sometimes not even as far as this) is not a day-to-day reality.<sup>160</sup> The experience of low income consumers is thus at risk of receiving insufficient attention, or of being ignored completely, when using business archives of a retailer such as Marks and Spencer, whose customer base was primarily individuals and households who were able to exercise discretion in their food choices and had access to disposable income which facilitated the making of relatively autonomous consumption decisions.

However, within the scholarship on post-war British consumer history there is agreement that the twentieth century can be broadly defined as a fundamental shift from the consumption of the majority of the population being borne out of necessity and need at the beginning of the century to affluence and the proliferation of choice by the end. The starkness of the difference was not as dramatic as that posed by Jack

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<sup>160</sup> For example, an article from the *Independent* in March 2015 showed that users of food banks in Britain were struggling to meet their basic nutritional needs: 'Food bank users at risk of developing nutritional problems, warns expert', *Independent*, 18<sup>th</sup> March 2015.

Drummond in *The Englishman's Food*, where he claimed that 'it is no exaggeration to say that the opening of the twentieth century saw malnutrition more rife in England than it had been since the great dearths of medieval and Tudor times'.<sup>161</sup>

John Burnett very much viewed this as an exaggeration and instead drew attention to the nutritional deficiencies of soldiers and civilians in 1941 as exemplifying the restriction and poverty of choice in the first half of the twentieth century.<sup>162</sup>

Matthew Hilton saw this shift as so central to the history and experience of consumers in the twentieth century that he divided his book *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* into two halves: necessity and affluence. In the book's introduction, Hilton sets forth three distinct ways of categorising goods: 'those associated with luxury, with necessity and with affluence'.<sup>163</sup> He explained that, as a retailer, Marks and Spencer identified the increasing affluence of their customers and sought to change their retail practices as a result. In 1967 Marcus Sieff explained that 'the growing affluence of the society in our immediate markets and it is hoped an improvement in the standards of the developing countries will undoubtedly mean that we shall have to improve the quality of our goods.'<sup>164</sup> Sieff was responding directly to a shift in the experience of consumers, anticipating the changes in their consumption behaviour and adjusting the company's retailing strategies to account for these changes. But it was not just the strategies of retailers that the growing affluence of consumers affected. In his afterword to the updated edition of *The Affluent Society*, added in 1985, Galbraith perceived that 'increasing and more

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<sup>161</sup> Jack Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, revised by Dorothy Hollingsworth, *The Englishman's Food: A History of Five Centuries of English Diet* (London: Alden Press, 1957) [first published in 1939] p. 403.

<sup>162</sup> John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: a Social History of Food in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London: Routledge, 1988) [first published in 1966] p. 243.

<sup>163</sup> Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. 19.

<sup>164</sup> MSCA, CR/B/4/1/10, Marcus Sieff, 'Britain in the Seventies', speech given at Shell Mex - B.P staff college on 24<sup>th</sup> May 1967, p. 5.

general affluence has changed political and social attitudes and behaviour'.<sup>165</sup> This idea will be discussed later in this chapter as part of a consideration of both the politics of consumption and the politicisation of consumption. Thus, much of the scholarship on the history of consumers in Britain in the twentieth century, both from social historians and economists, concurs that the major trend was the dramatic change from necessity to affluence. However, the experience of consumers in the early 1980s may serve to complicate this neat narrative and to disrupt the smooth chronology put forward by Drummond and Burnett. In a speech to divisional executives and senior managers in 1980 the Marks and Spencer Chairman spoke of the difficulties facing both consumers and businesses at that time. He outlined the problems facing consumers as high unemployment, shorter working time, and an increase to costs of living with rising food prices.<sup>166</sup>

One issue which unites historians of consumption is the influence of their own experiences as consumers in shaping their understandings of the past. As members of this modern 'consumer society', it is natural to set out to understand this current phenomena by exploring its historical roots and searching for the origins of modernity in the past. But what, exactly, is meant by the term 'consumer society'? I. R. C. Hirst drew on the definitions of economists to describe the 'the consumer society in the sense of an economy directed by the purchasing decisions of millions of individual consumers'.<sup>167</sup> Thus, a significant factor of the modern 'consumer

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<sup>165</sup> John Kenneth Galbraith, *The Affluent Consumer* (London: André Deutsch, 1985) [first published in 1958] pp. 275 - 276.

<sup>166</sup> MSCA. CR/B/4/1/187, 'Chairman's talk to divisional executives and senior managers', 11<sup>th</sup> August 1980.

<sup>167</sup> I. R. C. Hirst, 'Consumer choice and collective choice' in I. R. C. Hirst and W. Duncan Reekie (eds.), *The Consumer Society* (London: Routledge, 2001) [first published in 1977].



society' is the reorganisation of the British economy from being driven by production to being directed by consumption. Historians writing before the global recession of 2008 might be excused for thinking that people's construction of identities as 'consumers' had usurped that of class. When John Prescott famously declared that 'we're all middle class now' on the eve of the 1997 general election, it might have been observed that the ability to consume had trumped class as the structural feature of British social hierarchy.<sup>168</sup> However, it is evident that class remains as a significant facet in the construction of identities, whether that is private, self-defined identities or those allocated to individuals within the public sphere. Indeed, class as a category of analysis continues to strongly influence and shape people's experience of consumption. Again, this highlights the challenges presented to historians using a business archive to explore the themes and issues traditionally associated with the sub-discipline of social history. Class was not a topic discussed by Marks and Spencer either publicly or internally between the 1950s and 1980s. Indeed, it may be argued that class was not in the vernacular language of the company. Instead, the role of class as a category of analysis which affected the experiences of the company's customers may be ascertained by engaging with Marks and Spencer's retail 'other': the co-operative societies. Jeffreys argued that the co-operative societies appealed directly to working class consumers and thus 'had the unique advantages of working-class democratic control and of payment of a dividend on purchases'.<sup>169</sup> It may therefore be suggested that with the co-operative societies' stronghold as the food retailer of choice among working-class consumers, Marks and

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<sup>168</sup> 'We're all middle class now, darling', *Daily Telegraph*, 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2010.

<sup>169</sup> James B. Jeffreys, *Retail trading in Britain 1850 - 1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954) p. 34.

Spencer's market was defined for them as being composed primarily of middle-class consumers and aspirational working-class families.

One of the key insights afforded by the study of a business archive in an exploration of consumer history is the pervasion of consumer culture into evermore aspects of people's lives. The spread of the 'consumer society' can be clearly identified within the recent retail history of Marks and Spencer. Though outside the timeframe of this thesis, since the mid-1980s the goods and services Marks and Spencer have offered to their customers has diversified from textiles and food to include financial products and energy. In 1985 the company founded St Michael Financial Services to offer charge cards. This was later renamed 'M&S Money' and, in 2004 was sold in part to HSBC. M&S Money has now been expanded to offer current accounts, savings accounts and insurance.<sup>170</sup> The company also moved into the retail of domestic energy, partnering with SSE to provide domestic gas and electricity supply under the name 'M&S Energy'.<sup>171</sup> This is in addition to their activities as a financial exchange, with bureau de change counters in many of their high street stores. The diversification of their offering is, in many ways, a continuation of the proliferation of choice evident in their food retail history, which this thesis argues is in response to a central tenet of the British consumerism after World War II: a demand for ever greater food variety. It also provides an interesting dimension on the discussion of a 'consumer society', as it highlights the role of retailers in facilitating and staking a future role for themselves in the construction of consumer identities through the

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<sup>170</sup> [accessed online at [bank.marksandspencer.com/explore/about-us/history/](http://bank.marksandspencer.com/explore/about-us/history/) on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014].

<sup>171</sup> [accessed online at [www.mandsenergy.com](http://www.mandsenergy.com) on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014]. SSE was previously known as Scottish and Southern Energy.

products and services they consume. Marks and Spencer was capitalising upon the loyalty and trust it has established within its relationship with customers over the course of the twentieth century. The company was able to leverage its 'brand', alongside industry partners such as SSE, to convince customers to consume not only Marks and Spencer food and clothing, but also essential services.

In this consideration of modern Britain as a consumer society and the search for the source of modernity in the past, a logical consequence of the reorganisation of society along the lines of consumption is the opportunity for consumers to express political beliefs through consumption choices and the politicisation of the act of consuming. Matthew Hilton drew a distinction between 'customer consumers' and 'citizen consumers'. Acknowledging consumerism as a 'central tenet of citizenship in the modern state', he argued that 'customer consumers' (a conceptualisation of consumerism as shopping and the acquisition of goods) was the organising principle in the politics of consumption in the second half of the twentieth century, over and above the idea of politically engaged and informed 'citizen consumers'.<sup>172</sup> There has been a move in recent years towards an understanding of consumer history which engages with both the politics of consumption and the concept of consumption as a politicised act, particularly with regard to food. The majority of these studies appeared in the early 2000s, arguably influenced by the work of the New Labour government and their policies which sought to involve consumer interests in political decision-making. The creation of the Food Standards Agency in April 2000 was the clearest signal of the prominent position afforded to consumers during Tony Blair's

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<sup>172</sup> Hilton, 'Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain', p. 241.

first term as Prime Minister. The agency was created to promote and safeguard the interests of consumers, with an emphasis on food safety, and was independent from ministerial control and committed to transparency, with minutes from Board meetings being made publicly available.

This climate of consumer empowerment within the political sphere undoubtedly served to inspire historians to seek out examples of politicised consumption in the past, in order to understand the roots of the consumer agency which was gaining traction in this contemporary context. This is evident in Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska's work on wartime rationing and controls and in Frank Trentmann's study of consumption and citizenship, which examined the activities of the Women's Co-operative Guild and the Free Trade movement in the early twentieth century.<sup>173</sup> Within an American context, Lisabeth Cohen has argued for the emergence of a 'Consumers' Republic' between 1940 and 1970, where participation in mass consumption came to stand for 'an elaborate ideal of economic abundance and democratic political freedom'.<sup>174</sup> Cohen argued that mass participation in consumption transformed the political landscape of post-war America and vice versa, creating an ideology of the 'consumer as citizen'. She points to the politicization of African American consumers as an influential factor in the Civil Rights Movement and the pro-consumption rhetoric of post-war governments as integral to the country's economic recovery and prosperity in the second half of the

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<sup>173</sup> Ina Zweiniger-Bargielowska, *Austerity in Britain: Rationing, Controls, and Consumption 1939 - 1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Frank Trentmann, 'Bread, Milk and Democracy: Consumption and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century Britain' in Daunt and Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Consumption*, pp. 129 - 163.

<sup>174</sup> Lisabeth Cohen, 'Citizens and Consumers in the US in the Century of Mass Consumption' in Daunt and Hilton (eds.), *The Politics of Mass Consumption*, p. 214. Also see Lisabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Post-war America* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

twentieth century. Similarly, Hilton's work on consumer politics in post-war Britain has explored the role of groups such as the Consumers' Association and the importance of political mechanisms which advocate consumer protection, such as the Molony Committee of 1962, in representing the interest of consumers on the political stage.<sup>175</sup> Hilton was forthright in his call for a reconceptualization of consumer history as analogous to its political context, explaining that his 2003 text *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain* was 'an attempt to re-politicise consumerism, both as a category of analysis and a field of historical study'.<sup>176</sup>

The politicisation of food consumption is an issue which is substantiated in the Marks and Spencer company archive and engagement with these primary materials adds further complexity to this discussion. The company actively promoted the Israeli food industry through their work with producers and food technologists in Israel. It was subject to consumer boycotts and activism expressed through the consumption of food. In February 1978, the Canadian newspaper the *Globe and Mail* reported that an Israeli Jaffa orange being sold in a Marks and Spencer store in London had been contaminated with mercury. The company was one of a number of retailers in Europe to receive the poisoned fruit, with the oranges also being found in Belgium, Sweden, Holland and West Germany. The international press coverage focussed on Holland and West Germany, as five children were hospitalised in Maastricht after consuming the fruit.<sup>177</sup> The Canadian newspaper reported that a

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<sup>175</sup> Hilton, 'Consumer Politics in Post-war Britain', pp. 241 - 259; Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>176</sup> Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain*, p. 5.

<sup>177</sup> 'Western Europe warned about poisoned oranges from Israel', *Observer-Reporter* [Washington, Pennsylvania], 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1978; 'Israel steps up check for poisoned

group called the Arab Revolutionary Army-Palestine Command had claimed responsibility for the contaminations.<sup>178</sup>

If one understands the history of food consumption in the twentieth century as part of a transition from a society of producers to one of consumers, then it is easy to see how consumption developed opportunities to become a highly-charged political act. The targeting of food products by groups acting out of political causes has the potential to disrupt social norms and call into question the notions of trust and loyalty which were so central in the relationship between food retailers and consumers. However, the extent to which this politicisation of consumption in the form of consumer boycotts impacted on the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer is questionable. There are no primary sources in their company archive which provide any evidence that these issues were being considered or responded to internally. The company did not change their buying policies and one of the only allusions to consumer boycotts was made in a promotional video in 1976. Making reference to the League of Arab States' boycott of Israel in 1976,<sup>179</sup> the voice over in the video calmly explains that 'today Marks and Spencer is on the Arab blacklist, though that doesn't seem to deter Arabs'.<sup>180</sup> A report by the *Guardian* in 1979 similarly echoed the absence of gravity in the retailer's response to the boycott:

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oranges', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3<sup>rd</sup> February 1978. This event was also referenced in the *Guardian* in an article on product tampering in 1989: 'Product tampering began with seven cyanide deaths', *Guardian*, 27<sup>th</sup> April 1989.

<sup>178</sup> 'First poisoned orange in Britain reported by Jewish-owned store' in the *Globe and Mail*, 7<sup>th</sup> February 1978.

<sup>179</sup> The League of Arab States was formed in 1945 by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon and later grew to include 22 members. In *Foreign Affairs* in 1977 Nancy Turck described the ongoing boycott of Israel by the League of Arab States as 'intended to prevent Arab states and discourage non-Arabs from directly or indirectly contributing to Israel's economic and military strength': Nancy Turck, 'The Arab Boycott of Israel' in *Foreign Affairs*, 55, 3 (April, 1977) p. 472.

<sup>180</sup> 'The Gospel According to St Michael', 06:55.

‘Marks and Spencer also feel confident that their wares will continue to make welcome gifts in distant desert lands, though with the St Michael labels carefully snipped off’.<sup>181</sup> The lack of significance attached to consumer boycotts in the 1970s by Marks and Spencer is in itself revealing as it raises questions around the impact of these boycotts in affecting political change. However, these boycotts may be viewed as examples of the proto-politicisation of consumption: the roots of consumer activism which was to expand as the autonomy of consumers and the conception of consumption as a political act became fully realised in the latter years of the twentieth century.

Whilst slightly outside the timeframe of this research project, the increasing popularity of vegetarian and vegan food products was a significant trend in the social history of food in the later decades of the twentieth century. British food retailers began to respond to the increasing demands for vegetarian and, to a lesser extent, vegan foods in the 1980s and Marks and Spencer serve as an interesting case study. This subject has yet to attract any significant attention from historians of the social history of food in the twentieth century. The majority of the scholarship on the history of vegetarianism looks at the Victorian period. The most notable of these works are James Gregory’s monograph *Of Victorians and Vegetarians* and Julia Twigg’s unpublished doctoral thesis ‘The vegetarian movement in England, 1847-1981: with particular reference to its ideology’.<sup>182</sup> Gregory’s research contextualised the vegetarian movement within the social, cultural and political history of Victorian

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<sup>181</sup> ‘Arabs carry on shopping’, *Guardian*, 5<sup>th</sup> February 1979.

<sup>182</sup> James Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians: The Vegetarian Movement in Nineteenth-century Britain* (London: Taurus Academic Studies, 2007); Julia Twigg, ‘The vegetarian movement in England, 1847 - 1981: with particular reference to its ideology’ (doctoral thesis, University of London, 1981).

Britain, whilst Twigg's thesis was rooted in an exploration of the ideology of vegetarianism. Both highlighted the politicisation of consumption which was evident in the vegetarian movement and drew attention to the work of the co-operative movement in facilitating alternative consumption choices.<sup>183</sup> However, neither Twigg nor Gregory engaged in any significant way with the role of British food retailers in responding to the changing demands of consumers with regards to vegetarian consumption choices. This is perhaps unsurprising for Gregory's work, as the scope of his study was limited to Victorian period and thus to a large extent pre-dates the expansion of the major multiple food retailers. Twigg's work continued to the 1980s and whilst she touched on the emergence of health-food shops in the 1970s, her focus was on the system of beliefs at the heart of the vegetarian movement rather than on any developments in food retailing.<sup>184</sup> The history of vegetarianism as a consumption choice and, correspondingly, as a retailing strategy is yet to be explored.

It is important not to overstate the proportion of UK consumers who identified as having strictly vegetarian or vegan diets. It was noted in the *National Diet and Nutrition Survey*, carried out on behalf of the Department of Health and the Food Standards Agency, that in 2010 only 2 per cent of both adults and children reported as following a vegetarian diet and less than one percent of survey participants followed a vegan diet.<sup>185</sup> Whilst the reasons behind the dietary choices of these survey participants were not explored, the decision to eat foods which do not include

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<sup>183</sup> See Gregory, *Of Victorians and Vegetarians*, p. 159; Twigg, 'The vegetarian movement in England', p. 127.

<sup>184</sup> Twigg, p. 311.

<sup>185</sup> Public Health England and Food Standards Agency, *National Diet and Nutrition Survey: Results from Years 1, 2, 3 and 4 (combined) of the Rolling Programme (2008/2009 - 2011/2012)*, 14<sup>th</sup> May 2014, p. 56.



animal products can often be complex and deeply personal. Motivations may range from moral concerns over the consumption of animals, both general and specific concerns around animal welfare and the treatment of animals in increasingly intense processes of animal husbandry and more recently a mindfulness of the carbon footprint of intensively farmed meat.

The Marks and Spencer company archive provides an interesting starting point for an investigation of the retailing of vegetarian food in the late-twentieth century. The company's innovative work in bringing chilled ready meals to market, discussed in greater detail in chapter 6 of this thesis, went hand-in-hand with their development of meat-free food products. In an article in *St Michael News* in 1981 the company announced the success of their line of chilled vegetable dishes, with pre-prepared baked potatoes proving to be a popular with customers. A produce merchandiser is quoted as saying that 'demand has far exceeded supplies' with supplies of these vegetarian items 'limited until we have overcome the supply problem'.<sup>186</sup> A checking list from 1984 shows that the company's chilled recipe dishes included an omelette meal, aubergine parmigiana and frozen macaroni cheese.<sup>187</sup> The company also began to publish specialist vegetarian cookery book in the mid-1980s, with titles such as *Vegetarian Feast* and *Seasonal Vegetarian*.<sup>188</sup> However, the concept of vegetarianism was not being discussed by the company as an act of politicised consumption. Instead, the changing demands of consumers with regard to vegetarian food were being talked of in relation to a wider shift in consumer behaviour towards healthier eating and lifestyle choices. An article in *St Michael News* in April 1985

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<sup>186</sup> 'Vegetables à la carte', *St Michael News* (December, 1981) p. 7.

<sup>187</sup> MSCA, E13/3/24, 'December 1984 Checking List', F.25 Recipe Dishes (1984).

<sup>188</sup> MSCA, T27/1/29, Elain Bastable, *Vegetarian Feast* (1985); T21/1/200, Sarah Bounds, *Seasonal Vegetarian* (1986).

announced the introduction of new vegetarian recipe dishes. It was explained that these products were ‘launched to meet the growing demand for healthier eating and meat-free main course meals’.<sup>189</sup> A food selector is quoted as saying that ‘there is a definite market for them because there is very little in the way of the main meal prepared dishes using only vegetables’.<sup>190</sup> For Marks and Spencer as a food retailer, the conceptualisation of vegetarianism as a politicised consumption choice was not an issue with which it engaged. Again, this highlights the challenge of using a business archive as a lens to explore wider social history. From an initial examination of the company’s archive, it may be observed that the increasing popularity of meat-free dietary choices were being perceived by Marks and Spencer as part of a wider shift in the behaviour of consumers towards ‘healthy eating’, rather than as a process of politicised consumption.

This chapter has shown how the historiography of consumer history has developed over time and situated this discussion within the primary material held in the Marks and Spencer company archive. The wider cultural resonance of the company was discussed, where it was found that Marks and Spencer were perceived by both consumers and those in the political sphere as a trustworthy retailer of quality produce and, primarily by the company itself and in retrospective press analysis, as a ‘national institution’. The twentieth century saw a shift in the experience of the majority of British consumers from the consumption of food as an act borne out of necessity and the meeting of basic nutritional needs to an activity associated with choice and consumer agency. The process of democratisation was both consumer-driven and retailer-led, with increasing numbers of the population able to participate

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<sup>189</sup> ‘Making a Meal of Vegetables’, *St Michael News* (April, 1985) p. 4.

<sup>190</sup> ‘Making a Meal of Vegetables’, p. 4.

in the types of food consumption offered by retailers such as Marks and Spencer and the retailers themselves developing retail practices which offered ever greater choice and access to different kinds of products. Alongside these developments in the widening of access to food products and the expansion of variety, there emerged a wider concept which involved the redefinition of people's identities according to their ability to purchase goods and services: the consumer society. In British society the ability to consume became a defining factor in the way that people experienced their day-to-day lives after the Second World War. Retailers such as Marks and Spencer played a key role in both responding to this and in developing retailing strategies which widened the scope of this, creating ever more opportunities for consumers to express themselves through their consumption choices, even in areas such as banking and the supply of domestic gas and electricity. The logical conclusion of the consumer society was the use of consumption as a means of communicating political beliefs and in the politicisation of consumers in government policy-making. By the end of the period being examined in this thesis, the consideration of the interests of the British public by policymakers were frequently discussed in terms of people's identities as consumers. The agency of consumers will be reflected upon throughout this thesis and it will be argued that the process of democratization as understood as the increase in access to an ever greater variety of food products was central to the history of consumers in twentieth-century Britain.

## **Chapter 3 - Multiple food retailing**

This chapter explores the history of multiple retailing in Britain and forms the basis for subsequent discussions of the series of innovations which took place in Marks and Spencer's food retail practices during the period 1950 - 1980. An analysis of the existing scholarship on this topic is fundamental to understanding the areas of change and continuity in the company's retail strategies and the relationship these had with consumer behaviour. Whilst this investigation draws on the major debates in business and retail history, the focus will be on the social history of food consumption in the twentieth century. The changing nature of shopping will be considered, alongside changes in consumer demands for variety, quality, affordability and convenience. Material from the Marks and Spencer company archive will be contextualised within the broader literature on the social history of food purchasing and consumption, a literature that, it will be argued, fails to take account of the company's significant role in the food retail sector. Marks and Spencer provide a particularly interesting case study for an exploration of the retail history of twentieth-century Britain as it was, for the majority of the century, a family-owned and family-run business which expanded rapidly in the interwar years. It will be argued that the greatest shift in twentieth-century retail history was the rise of multiple retailers in the interwar period and the presence of the stores of these companies on the high streets of major cities and towns in Britain. This affected not only what people consumed, but how.

A useful starting point for this discussion can be found in the following extract from Seebohm Rowntree's renowned social survey of York in the 1930s, as it neatly summarises many of the key issues of multiple retailing in the twentieth century:

There are three large chain stores in York: Woolworth's, Marks and Spencer, and British Home Stores. They affect the lives of the workers in two different ways.

First they place within reach of people of limited means a range of goods far wider than was available to them before, and sold in many cases at prices noticeably lower than those charged elsewhere. This does not affect the minimum cost of maintaining a family in a state of physical efficiency, for the advantage in price is not to be found in the bare necessities of life, such as flour, sugar, tea, milk, cheap cuts of meat, potatoes etc., but rather in such goods as tinned foods, confectionery, biscuits, clothing, crockery, glass-ware, toilet articles, tools, stationery and hundreds of other miscellaneous goods which people of limited means buy.

A second way in which these stores affect the lives of the workers is that they provide a form of entertainment! There is no doubt that thousands of people enter the stores just for the fun of having a look around. They see a vast assortment of goods displayed which they may examine at their leisure without being asked to buy.<sup>191</sup>

Rowntree outlined the two key ways in which the business practices of multiple retailers, including Marks and Spencer, were affecting the experience of 'workers' and, thus, the social history of consumers in the early years of the twentieth century. Firstly, he explained that these stores were part of a process of democratization in British retail and consumption, with an increasing range of goods available at lower

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<sup>191</sup> B. Seebohm Rowntree, *Poverty and progress: a second social survey of York* (London: Longmans, Green, 1941) pp. 218 - 219.

prices to ever greater sections of society. Secondly, Rowntree discussed the changing nature of shopping during the early part of the twentieth century, with the act of shopping itself becoming a form of leisure activity and entertainment, and highlighted the role of multiple retailers in facilitating this through their retail practices.

Rees saw the democratization of consumption as central to the success of Marks and Spencer as a retailer in the twentieth century. In his discussion of the company's strategy of expanding the square footage of its stores after the abolition of building controls in 1954, he argued that:

These great new stores were something new of their kind in Britain, and were part of a new way of life. They were a genuine element of social progress and offered to everyone the opportunity for shopping under conditions of comfort, convenience and cleanliness that were scarcely available before, except in department stores catering for the needs of a privileged class.<sup>192</sup>

Rees drew attention to the company's achievement in meeting the demands of newly affluent consumers in the post-war period, providing quality products at prices which represented good value and bringing to market an increasingly sophisticated range of food products. This viewpoint illustrates that the historical interest offered by an exploration of the company's retail history and highlights the importance of studying their retailing practices and understanding their relationship with their customers.

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<sup>192</sup> Rees, p. 229.

The 'chain stores' discussed by Rowntree, also referred to as multiple retailers, were one of the great success stories in twentieth-century British retail history. The working definition used for the purposes of this thesis is an organisation with multiple retail outlets in different locations across Britain. Historical research into multiple retailing in Britain has developed over the past sixty years since the ground-breaking work of Jefferys in 1954. Jefferys used quantitative sources from the Census of Distribution and Ministry of Food alongside data from individual firms, including the co-operatives societies and Woolworths, to explore the history of distributive trades from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth century.<sup>193</sup> Mathias's 1967 research into multiple retailing focussed on the history of distribution and formed a more qualitative analysis of the business history of firms such as Lipton and Home and Colonial Stores, touching on social issues within the core discussion of economic and distributive developments.<sup>194</sup> However, until the 1990s, the historiography of this topic was primarily dominated by 'biographical' accounts of individual organisations.<sup>195</sup> These often took the form of coffee table books, frequently commissioned by the companies themselves, which drew upon archival material and oral history recordings with staff members to present a positively-framed history of the organisation in question. This was certainly the case for Marks and Spencer, who commissioned Asa Briggs to write a centenary history of the company, drawing upon the oral and written histories of Marks and Spencer employees and primary archival material, and published a commemorative text of

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<sup>193</sup> James B. Jefferys, *Retailing Trading in Britain, 1850 - 1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1954).

<sup>194</sup> Peter Mathias, *Retailing Revolution: a History of Multiple Retailing in the Food Trades based upon the Allied Suppliers Group of Companies* (London: Longmans, 1967).

<sup>195</sup> Asa Briggs, *The Friends of the People: the centenary history of Lewis's* (London: Batsford, 1956); Reginald Pound, *Selfridge: a biography* (London: Heinemann, 1960); Maurice Corina, *Fine silks and oak counter: Debenhams, 1778 - 1978* (London: Hutchinson, 1978).

the company's experiences in wartime, which was written by the company archivist Paul Bookbinder.<sup>196</sup> Discussion of the social history of multiple retailing was rare and brief in these commissioned company histories, and they often served a greater utility to historians of business and organisational structure than for researchers of social change.<sup>197</sup> The 1990s saw the history of multiple retailers emerge as a topic of research within the field of social geography, particularly with reference to space. Gareth Shaw examined the impact that large-scale retailing had on the structure of commercial areas and, more pertinently for this thesis, the behaviour and buying habits of consumers.<sup>198</sup> Shaw, Alexander, Benson and Jones used Marks and Spencer as a case study in an exploration of the structural and spatial trends in retailing from the late nineteenth century to the interwar period.<sup>199</sup> Similarly, Martin Purvis used a geographical methodology in order to explore the development of the co-operative societies' retailing in the late nineteenth century.<sup>200</sup>

In recent years, the history of multiple retailing has received greater attention in the scholarship of both historians and geographers, with research into the social history of retailing becoming a growing area of historical inquiry. Within these recent developments in research the social history of British retailing has received attention, both as part of wider context-setting research into retail history and in its own right

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<sup>196</sup> Briggs, *Marks & Spencer 1884 - 1984: a centenary history of Marks & Spencer*; Bookbinder, *Marks & Spencer: the war years 1939 - 1945*.

<sup>197</sup> Briggs, *Marks & Spencer 1884 - 1984*, pp. 74 - 75.

<sup>198</sup> Gareth Shaw, 'Evolution & impact of large-scale retailing in Britain' in John Benson and Gareth Shaw (eds.), *The Evolution of Retail Systems, c.1800 -1914* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992) pp. 135 - 165; Gareth Shaw, 'The European scene: Britain and Germany' in Benson and Shaw (eds.), *The Evolution of Retail Systems*, pp. 17 - 34.

<sup>199</sup> Shaw, Alexander, Benson and Jones, 'Structural and Spatial Trends in British Retailing', pp. 79 - 93.

<sup>200</sup> Martin Purvis, 'The development of co-operative retailing in England and Wales, 1851 - 1901: a geographical study', *Journal of Historical Geography*, vol.16, no.3 (July, 1990) p. 314 - 331.



as a mode of analysis and methodological approach. Arguably, one of the most interesting pieces of research from a methodological and interdisciplinary perspective was the 2005 work of Coopey, O'Connell and Porter, which looked at the history of mail order retailing.<sup>201</sup> This research sought to explore the social history and experiences of life in twentieth-century Britain through the business histories and archival material of mail order catalogue firms. It focussed on the experience of firms such as Kays of Worcester, Littlewoods and Freemans and used traditional business history lines of inquiry into organisational structure and operations. However, the authors expanded the scope of their research and used the business histories of these companies to explore the social context in which changes to their retailing practices were taking place. Specifically for mail order retailing, the emphasis was on the 'burgeoning aspirations of working-class consumers' and the social impact of these organisations on a diverse range of issues including female participation in the labour market, with many women selling and distributing for these catalogue companies and working flexibly alongside their domestic commitments.<sup>202</sup> It is precisely this method of inquiry, using a company archive and traditional business history material to explore social history, which drives the analysis of this thesis.

Whilst this thesis focuses on the social history of consumers in Britain with relation to the food retailing practices of Marks and Spencer, it is important to remember that the experiences of British consumers and retailers in the twentieth century were not taking place in a national vacuum. One of the defining features of the company's

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<sup>201</sup> Richard Coopey, Sean O'Connell and Dilwyn Porter, *Mail order retailing in Britain: a business and social history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>202</sup> Coopey, O'Connell and Porter, *Mail order retailing in Britain*, p. 5 and pp. 111 - 117.

food retail history is the ongoing process of knowledge transfer which was taking place both across the British food industry and within increasingly international food supply chains. This will be further discussed in chapter 4 with specific reference to Marks and Spencer's hygienic food practices. The concept of multiple retailing was not a uniquely British phenomenon and, indeed, many of the facets of the experience and organisational principles in the practices of multiple retailing, particularly the retailing of food, originated in America. Existing scholarship on Marks and Spencer and material in the company's business archive clearly show the important influence that American business principles had on the company's retailing practices in both the interwar period and into the second half of the twentieth century. Jessen and Langer even went so far as to argue that '[i]f there was indeed a "revolution" in retailing in Western Europe after 1945, then it has been perceived and interpreted by many as an "Americanization" revolution'.<sup>203</sup> An essential element of Marks and Spencer's success as a food retailer was the company's ability to identify examples of best practice in American retailing and implement and assimilate these techniques into their own food retailing strategies. The company was negotiating and translating American business methods into a specific British context which met the needs and preferences of its customer base.

Within the specific context of multiple retailing, the influence of American retailing on the business practices of Marks and Spencer can be seen in two key areas. The first is in the management and organisation of the company and their stores, influencing strategies in the collection and interpretation of sales data and the layout of shop floors. The second is the utilisation of innovative retailing techniques, which

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<sup>203</sup> Jessen and Langer, p. 4.

was most evident in the implementation of self-service in stores during the 1950s. Engaging with these American practices offered retailers like Marks and Spencer the opportunity to take advantage of cutting-edge retailing techniques, such as the application of technological advances in fresh food retailing and the professionalisation of retailing strategies which drove profitability. It may also be argued that the American influence on British multiple retailing was part of a wider trend for embracing the culture and values of what Victoria de Grazia has termed the 'irresistible empire'.<sup>204</sup>

In 1921 Simon Marks 'made the first of a series of visits to the United States so that he might study on the spot the principles and methods of the chain store organisations which had sprung up there'.<sup>205</sup> In Judi Bevan's history of Marks and Spencer, she discussed these visits and described how 'Simon's visit to America confirmed his own belief that the public wanted quality for their money, not just low prices'.<sup>206</sup> Marks described his travels to the United States as 'my first serious lesson in the chain store art', explaining that:

I learned the value of checking lists to control stocks and sales. I learned that new accounting machines could to reduce the time formidably to give the necessary information in hours instead of weeks. I learned the value of counter footage and how, in the chain store operation, each foot of counter space had to pay wages, rent, overhead expenses and profit. There could be no blind spots in so far as goods are concerned. This meant a much more exhaustive study of the

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<sup>204</sup> Victoria de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire: America's Advance through Twentieth-Century Europe* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

<sup>205</sup> MSCA, Q/Q5/2, M.A. Silverman, 'An Essay in Distributive Economy: Marks and Spencer, September 1894 - September 1944' (1944) p. 10.

<sup>206</sup> Bevan, *The Rise and Fall of Marks & Spencer: - and How It Rose Again*, p. 29.

goods we were selling and the needs of the public. It meant that the staff who were operating had to be re-educated and retrained.<sup>207</sup>

The areas outlined by Marks, information collection and analysis, maximising profitability of square footage, streamlining product selection in accordance with consumer behaviour and staff training were to remain the central tenants of Marks and Spencer's retailing strategies beyond the period being examined in this thesis. The influence of American multiple retailing can, therefore, be viewed as having had both an immediate and long-term impact on the activities of Marks and Spencer and this early transfer of knowledge was to shape its practices for decades to come. Marks continued to travel to America to learn about retailing techniques and to expand the scope of the company's work across the Atlantic. Letters between himself and Israel Sieff in 1940 reveal that America was frequently referenced in their correspondence during the war, where Marks wrote of his efforts in establishing a sales corporation for export in the United States.<sup>208</sup>

In their 2004 paper on self-service and the 'Americanisation of Food Retailing in Britain', Shaw, Curth and Alexander argued that the 'changes in store design and selling techniques were products of mass retail distribution brought about by the American chain stores'.<sup>209</sup> Self-service represented a significant departure in retailing practices, as it involved a move away from interacting directly with store employees to select goods to being able to serve oneself. This had a direct impact on

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<sup>207</sup> Ibid., p. 25.

<sup>208</sup> MSCA, CR/B/3/1/11 and CR/B/3/1/32, letters between Simon Marks and Israel Sieff in September - October 1940.

<sup>209</sup> Gareth Shaw, Louise Curth & Andrew Alexander, 'Selling Self-Service and the Supermarket: The Americanisation of Food Retailing in Britain, 1945 - 60', *Business History*, vol. 46, no. 4 (2004) p. 570.

the provision of information, as the products and their packaging now became a major channel of communication, and also saw a shift in the relationship between consumers and retailers as it granted customers autonomy in the store in both the way they negotiated the space and in the application of their judgements about quality, value etc. Using examples from Sainsbury and the trade magazine the *Grocer*, Shaw *et al* found that ‘many of the key developers of self-service and supermarkets had either made trips to America or had connections with American retailing’.<sup>210</sup> The Co-operative movement, the first organisation with multiple retail outlets in the UK to roll out self-service (beginning in 1942 in the Romford branch), did indeed send delegates to the United States to study self-service.<sup>211</sup> However the information available on the Co-operative Group’s website suggests that whilst there was undoubtedly a strong American influence in the movement’s adoption of this retail innovation, the direct aim of its strategy was focussed very much on their specific British context, with self-service ‘intended to save staff time during wartime staff shortages’.<sup>212</sup> Similarly, the experience of Sainsbury indicates that whilst the techniques were being learned in America, they were being translated and applied in a specific British context. In this case, a company history written by Bridget Williams explains that the visits made by Sainsbury’s executives to America in 1949 to study food retailing developments in the United States were part of a campaign carried out by the Ministry of Food in the aftermath of the Second World War, designed to ‘promote improvements in food retailing methods’.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>210</sup> Shaw, Curth & Alexander, ‘Selling Self-Service and the Supermarket’, p. 576.

<sup>211</sup> The Co-operative Group website, 150 stories, ‘Pamphlets Promoting Self-Service Shopping, c.1949, 3<sup>rd</sup> June 2013 [accessed online at [150.co-operative.coop/150-to-150/pamphlets-promoting-self-service-shopping-c-1949](http://150.co-operative.coop/150-to-150/pamphlets-promoting-self-service-shopping-c-1949) on 4<sup>th</sup> January 2015].

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>213</sup> Bridget Williams, *The Best Butter in the World: a History of Sainsbury’s* (London: Ebury Press, 1994) p. 125.

Marks and Spencer's first official foray into self-service took place after the war with a trial in their Wood Green store in 1948. The company trained staff and customers alike in this new innovation, with leaflets for customers explaining how to shop without the direct assistance of store employees.<sup>214</sup> However, the timeline for self-service at Marks and Spencer extends both before and after this period and, as with the co-operative societies, the sources available convey a less straightforward interpretation than simply an all-pervading American influence. As discussed previously, Marks and Spencer had indeed sent delegates to the United States to learn about cutting-edge retail innovations, of which self-service was a key example. Whilst the company first trialled self-service in 1948, it was not until the 1960s that this practice was extended to Marks and Spencer stores across the country. In the chairman's review of June 1962, it was explained that the company had now 'introduced counters, racks and other equipment specially designed to facilitate self-service and self-selection, a form of shopping which is much appreciated by the public'.<sup>215</sup> From this source it is clear that in the early 1960s Marks and Spencer considered itself to be responding directly to consumer demands for self-service and the company's retailing practices were adapting accordingly: applying technological advances in the presentation of food in-store to assist and develop this strategy. Whilst the company was not at the forefront of this specific innovation, the very concepts at the core of self-service (a move away from direct engagement with and dependence on store employees for service, assistance and information) were present in the early days of Marks and Spencer's history as a penny bazaar. In his autobiography, Israel Sieff recalled that whereas in other stores at the end of the

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<sup>214</sup> MSCA, S32/36, 'Leaflet for customers explaining how to shop in the Self Service experiment' (1948); HO/3/2/2/5/3, 'Staff Management News & Training News Bulletin: No.3' (June, 1948).

<sup>215</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1962.

nineteenth century stock would be held in drawers out of sight of customers, Simon Marks implemented a policy which simplified the buying process for customers and displayed all the goods on offer. Sieff explained that ‘people could come in, walk around, inspect all goods, buy or not buy as they pleased, knowing what the price was in advance, and be sure of getting value for money’. He identified a direct link between these late-nineteenth century retail practices of the company and the post-war developments in self-service:

Out of the psychology of this approach to selling goods were to emerge two of the most important principles of mid-twentieth century retail distribution: self-selection and self-service for the customer, and the organisation of the emporium to that purpose. Woolworths were to develop them in the United States; Liptons and Maypole, among others, in Britain.<sup>216</sup>

Thus, whilst acknowledging the American influence in self-service via companies such as Woolworths, Sieff also situated these retail innovations in both their specific British context and their historical context within Marks and Spencer’s retail history. Sieff’s discussion of the retail practices employed in the early years of the company also draw directly on Rowntree’s experience in 1930’s York. Getting goods out from behind the counter and displaying them to customers aided the development of shopping as a form of entertainment, with the customers free to engage with the space as they wished. Sieff explained that Michael Marks painted the original penny bazaar stalls ‘an unmistakable red. “Admission Free” was posted in large letters so that everybody should feel welcome’.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Israel Sieff, *The Memoirs of Israel Sieff* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1970) p. 57.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

The nature of shopping changed dramatically throughout the twentieth century in Britain, with shops and shopping becoming, for many consumers, a leisure activity, a form of entertainment, and a site of sociability. However, the roots of these transformations have been argued to have been established in the nineteenth- and, to a certain extent, the eighteenth century.<sup>218</sup> Walsh has argued that ‘up-market’ eighteenth-century shops in London, such as goldsmiths and drapers, used design and display ‘to entice customers and enhance the attractiveness of goods’.<sup>219</sup> An understanding of the importance of design and display in retailing was central to the success of Marks and Spencer and it was during the interwar period that the company established its own design department. In 1938 an in-house design department was established and later recruited Hans Schneider in 1949, who successfully integrated the company’s design work first into ladieswear.<sup>220</sup> The design of packaging and stores was carried out by this in-house design department. Fully integrating this process, and therefore not having to deal with an external agency, allowed them to respond quickly to changes in consumer behaviour with regards to design and also helped to create a cohesive aesthetic across stores and departments. Whilst other food retailers, such as Sainsbury, had their own design studios, Marks and Spencer was a particularly early adopter of design as a core component of its retailing practices.<sup>221</sup> This is particularly pertinent for this thesis as the company did not deploy print or television advertisements of its food products

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<sup>218</sup> William Hamish Fraser, *The coming of the mass market 1850 - 1914* (London: Macmillan, 1981); Alison Adburgham, *Shopping in style: London from the Restoration to Edwardian elegance* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979).

<sup>219</sup> Claire Walsh, ‘Shop Design and the Display of Goods in Eighteenth-century London’, *Journal of Design History*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1995) p. 157. See also Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1966) p. 181.

<sup>220</sup> Marcus Sieff, *Don’t Ask the Price: The Memoirs of the President of Marks & Spencer* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986) p. 169.

<sup>221</sup> See Jonny Trunk, *Own Label: Sainsbury’s Design Studio, 1962 - 1977* (London: FUEL, 2011), which dates the central role of design to packaging at Sainsbury’s as beginning in 1962 with the appointment of Peter Dixon as head of design.



and sold only own-brand products. As a result, the packaging of their food products and in-store marketing and displays were the main methods of visual communication with the company's customers.

Ideas around the importance of visually interesting displays and the spectacle of food shopping were clearly articulated in a display manual produced by the company in the 1940s and distributed to store managers. Decisions about food displays were strictly controlled by the head office. The manual explained that 'it is essential that only merchandise authorised by Head Office is displayed', in part due to the fact that the company was 'trying to standardize displays, not in details, but in general principles and methods of handling'.<sup>222</sup> The use of colour in displays was explained and employees reading the manual were informed that:

display is not merely the act of placing in the window a group of selected merchandise. It is the creation of design of living interest to arrest the attention of the passerby, to give pleasure to the eye and to demonstrate beyond the shadow of a doubt the merits of the merchandise. Above all, it must awaken in the shopper the desire to buy.<sup>223</sup>

This emphasis on the pleasure of shopping in the 1940s, when rationing was still in force, may initially appear at odds with the day-to-day reality of food consumption choices for British consumers. However, it may be argued that it was the experience of rationing which drove British retailers to place such importance on the spectacle of display and concepts of shopping as a form of entertainment.

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<sup>222</sup> MSCA, S/1/32/1, 'Display Manual' (c.1940s) section 10.

<sup>223</sup> *Ibid.*, introduction.

In his study of civilian morale during the Second World War, Robert Mackay argued that wartime food was characterised by ‘dull sufficiency’.<sup>224</sup> The stores of these multiple retailers therefore functioned as a form of escapism for consumers living under austerity, whilst still existing within the consumer realities of products which could be bought with ration books. Many of the images used in the 1940s display manual show canned goods, a means of preserving foodstuffs developed in the nineteenth century which came to be synonymous with wartime rationing due to their long shelf life and relative affordability and availability in relation to fresh foods, in various arrangements including step-by-step instructions on how to create ‘curved pyramid stacks’ displays of canned goods.<sup>225</sup> This elevation of ordinary cans to something which gave ‘pleasure to the eye’ through the use of display techniques was fundamental to the shift towards shopping as entertainment and a leisure activity, rather than just a chore, in the early part of the twentieth century. In this way, multiple retailers such as Marks and Spencer were redefining the experience of shopping for British consumers. In his study into the social history of department stores, Bill Lancaster argued that ‘spending and consuming is an enjoyable and creative process’.<sup>226</sup> The archival material concerning the display of products shows that food retail and consumption was understood, at least in part, as a creative process. This is illustrated by the attention to detail in the design of food displays in Marks and Spencer stores. The idea of shopping as entertainment and the use of displays as a means of marketing was a constant theme of the company’s retailing practices throughout the twentieth century. Addressing store managers in 1980, the

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<sup>224</sup> Robert Mackay, *Half the Battle: Civilian morale in Britain during the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002) p. 111. See also Mass Observation archive, Food, 3/E, ‘Housewives’ Feelings about Food’ (April, 1942).

<sup>225</sup> ‘Display Manual’, section 10.

<sup>226</sup> Lancaster, *The Department Store*. See also Pasi Falk and Colin Campbell (eds.), *The Shopping Experience* (London: SAGE, 1997); Jill Avery *et al* (eds.), *Consumer Behavior: Human Pursuit of Happiness in the World of Goods* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Open Mentis, 2011).

chairman Marcus Sieff urged them to consider ‘more imaginative approaches to in-store décor particularly in the larger store, such as set pieces, and possibly static models, better photographic material, better promotional material’.<sup>227</sup>

Shopping as a form of entertainment or leisure activity created demand for ever-larger stores in which to create an ‘experience’ for consumers and to satisfy consumer demands for increased variety and choice. For Marks and Spencer, this policy of continued expansion of the square footage of stores was established in the interwar period. Rees has argued that ‘[t]he history of a Marks and Spencer store is a history of continuous adaptation to social change’.<sup>228</sup> A report on progress in 1930 explained that ‘the company is concentrating on the development of spacious stores where goods can be displayed to the best advantage’.<sup>229</sup> There was a direct relationship between the company’s response to consumer demands for greater variety (which is found to be one of the defining characteristics of the British diet in chapter 5), their use of in-store displays and the size of stores. In Simon Marks’ 1954 chairman’s speech he told shareholders:

With the widening of our range of goods, space has become a most important factor in our stores. It is essential to provide more room for our goods so that they can be adequately and attractively displayed, and above all more room for our customers to shop in comfort.<sup>230</sup>

This was echoed in a 1964 report on store development, where it was detailed that ‘the widening range of St. Michael goods demands greater selling space to display

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<sup>227</sup> MSCA, CR/B/4/1/174, ‘Notes from the Chairman’s Address at the Managers’ Meetings on Wednesday February 6th, 13th and 20th, 29th January 1980’, p. 8.

<sup>228</sup> Rees, p. 235.

<sup>229</sup> MSCA, HO/10/2/3/2/1, ‘A Year’s Progress, April 1929 - March 1930’ (June, 1930).

<sup>230</sup> *Chairman’s Reviews*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1954, p. 7.

them to better advantage and to provide more spacious amenities for customers'.<sup>231</sup>

In the early 1960s, this policy of expansion was initially focussed on the most successful stores. The store development report set out the company's aim in this regard: 'the sales areas of the most important stores are increasing significantly and there is special emphasis on this aspect in our forward programme'.<sup>232</sup> The policy was described as having 'a profound impact on the size and character of the stores as a setting for our improving range of goods'. This report illustrates the long-term concern that Marks and Spencer had with its policy of expanding stores in order to better display their products. The company's store planning policy was directly related to the spectacle of display and satisfying consumer demands for greater variety.

Whilst consumer demands for greater variety were influential in the policy-making decisions of Marks and Spencer, a further complexity is added to this discussion by considering the way in which the company edited their catalogue of food items. The company was able to exercise a great deal of control over what was sold because it stocked only own-branded products. Chapter 1 showed how this enabled the company to act as a dynamic intermediary in the food retail sector: responding quickly to changes in consumer demands. This was particularly advantageous when, for example, a product was particularly popular and or if the quality of a product did not meet the company's exacting standards. As a result, the emphasis on increasing variety for consumers and the relationship between increased choice and the size of stores was tempered at various points in the company's history with a need to

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<sup>231</sup> MSCA, HO/10/2/3/2/6, 'A report on store development. Built 1963/4, Work for 1964/5, Further properties for future programmes' (March, 1964) p. 1.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1.

maintain value for money and to control the quality of their food products. In an audio-visual source in the company's archive from 1976 the then chairman Sir Marcus Sieff explained how this line between variety and value was negotiated in the 1970s:

There are certain items for which there is limited demand, which we don't sell and in that sense you can say we reduce choice. But if we were to run those items as well as the others either they would be extremely expensive or they would raise the whole price level.<sup>233</sup>

In the same video Robert Heller, editor of *Management Today* spoke of the impact that the company's policy in this area had on the industry as a whole:

its existence was a model for everybody else to follow. So other people started on the same road, other people began producing a limited catalogue that is cutting down on the number of products and product variation that they were willing to stock in their stores. Other people started dictating to manufacturers what they should make and how they should make it. So you now have a situation where no more than a dozen very large multiple groups have a stranglehold, really, on the high street and Marks & Spencer is directly responsible for that trend.<sup>234</sup>

The distinction Heller made between a reduction in consumer choice via the number of products sold and cutting down on product variation is an interesting point and one which is particularly pertinent to Marks and Spencer as a retailer of only own-brand products. It may be argued that as the company did not stock multiple versions of the same products by competing brands, this policy was not a reduction in variety

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<sup>233</sup> 'The Gospel According to St Michael', 33:00.

<sup>234</sup> 'The Gospel According to St Michael', 33:45.

*per se*, but rather a process of pre-selection on behalf of the retailer which had the result of both streamlining their offering to consumers and ensuring total control of the products sold in its stores. The relationship between this streamlining of choice and square footage was discussed in the notes of a meeting signed off by Simon Marks in August 1950. The notes explained that:

The amount of space given to a Department must bear some relation to the takings. This was one of the first principles on which the business had been built ... We must be more selective than hitherto. Many Departments appeared to be continuing lines which were no longer justified. In the Canned Goods Department, to take one example, it looked as if we were running lines in order to fill the space allotted to the Department. We were eliminating Sandwich Paste and Bread, and it might be that in the Biscuit and Sweet Departments, there were some slow sellers which ought to be eliminated. There was, too, a multiplicity of prices which could only be confusing ... the Food Departments must aim at producing first class merchandise, of which we could be justifiably proud, and which would offer that measure of variety which would make our stores attractive. We must, therefore, be much more selective.<sup>235</sup>

This source adds to an understanding of the complexity in the relationship between the ever increasing need for variety and accompanying square footage in order to display products and create an enjoyable shopping experience for customers, and the commercial drive to ensure maximum profitability. Whilst satisfying consumer demands for increased variety was undoubtedly a high priority, from a commercial perspective it was important to use sales space wisely and concentrate on popular, profitable lines. Square footage of sales space was linked to both of these issues and

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<sup>235</sup> MSCA, Q5/1 A&B, 'Typed notes signed off SM/CMB', 24<sup>th</sup> August 1950, pp. 1 - 2.

was part of an ongoing negotiation in how to balance variety with quality and profitability.

In order to exercise control over the variety of goods in offer in their stores, it was vital that the company was able to dictate the terms of the output of their suppliers. This balance of power between retailers and manufacturers within the food industry was a key issue in the twentieth century and, ultimately, it was the shift of power to the side of retailers and the shift in risk onto manufacturers which marked the history of retailing in this period. For Marks and Spencer, this shift was most clearly seen in the control of the quality of its products. In order to satisfy consumer demands for quality and to establish a reputation for itself within the market as a reliable and trustworthy seller of quality food products, the company negotiated contracts with their suppliers which involved exacting standards of food quality. Chapter 4 discusses these supplier requirements and the relationship Marks and Spencer had with suppliers with regards to hygiene. The quality of food products was a particularly important issue in the history of early twentieth-century multiple retailing. It may be argued that consumer demands for quality during the Second World War were driven by a desire to reduce waste and achieve the greatest possible level of value and utility from their rationed food items. Historically, there existed anxiety surrounding the quality and purity of foodstuffs sold by independent retailers, as explored within the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century context by French and Phillips.<sup>236</sup> In her study of the co-operative movement, Robertson explains that ‘the purity and quality of co-operative products was also emphasised in

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<sup>236</sup> Michael French and Jim Phillips, *Cheated not Poisoned?: Food Regulation in the United Kingdom, 1875 - 1938* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000).

the advertisements and literature produced by individual retail societies'.<sup>237</sup> Multiple retailers, under the influence of the retailing practices established by the co-operative societies, were thus able to leverage their reputation as trustworthy sources from which to purchase food by emphasising and delivering on the quality of their food products. Marks and Spencer clearly felt this acutely, as Marcus Sieff explained in 1980:

The customers' loyalty is not unbreakable. If 'St Michael' does not continue to be synonymous with good quality and value, why should they continue to shop with us? ...What has taken us 50 years to build up could be lost in a year of shoddy goods.<sup>238</sup>

Thus, gaining and preserving a reputation as a purveyor of quality food products was a long-term process and the specifications which Marks and Spencer set for suppliers were a vital part of this practice. An example of a specification to which the company's suppliers worked can be found in a document from 1971 detailing the supply of Greek currants. There were seventeen points in the specification, ranging from quality: 'to be shade dried "A" quality Vostizza currants dried on racks', to size: 'medium – about 560 berries per 100 grammes [sic]', colour: 'only dark black currants to be present – red currants will be excluded', and flavour: 'fruit to be of good normal flavour and free from all off flavours'.<sup>239</sup> Marks and Spencer would carry out regular checks of the premises of their food suppliers to ensure that these specifications were being met. Promoting the quality of food products created a need for alternative retailing practices when compared with the sale of textiles. As the

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<sup>237</sup> Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914 - 1960* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) p.138.

<sup>238</sup> MSCA, CR/B4/1/285, Marcus Sieff, 'Policy meeting', 6<sup>th</sup> August 1980, p. 5.

<sup>239</sup> MSCA, Q5/7/2, '1971 Crop Specially Washed Greek Shade Dried Vostizza Currants. Specification for Marks & Spencer Ltd., Quality' (1971).



ultimate quality of the product was the taste, flavour and eating quality, and these could not be determined by consumers at the point of purchase, it was necessary for Marks and Spencer and other food retailers to convey quality through other means via packaging and in-store display. Thus, the specifications for the company's own-brand products, which all made flavour and eating quality an established point of compliance, also placed a great deal on emphasis on the appearance of the food products themselves. Alongside the specifications set for suppliers at the point of production, the company implemented its quality control policies throughout the distribution of their food products. Nathan Goldenberg impressed upon the food development team the need to carefully examine shipments of imported fruit to ensure that quality had not deteriorated during transit. He explained that 'to maintain our standards of quality, it is sometimes necessary to re-select and re-grade some imported fruits at East Kent Packers (Faversham) and Fruit Distributors and Packers (Liverpool)'.<sup>240</sup> The centrality of quality within the food retailing practices of the company can be observed at all stages of the food chain. This was mirrored in the quality of service that was delivered by staff working on the shop floor and the company viewed customer service as a vital component in its relationship with customers. A VHS tape produced by the company in 1989 outlined this very clearly: 'Quality service gives us the opportunity to build on our reputation and increase our competitive advantage'.<sup>241</sup>

Chapter 5 argues that consumer demand for affordability was one of the defining features of the British diet and it was a demand which multiple retailers such as Marks and Spencer responded to directly throughout the twentieth century. One of

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<sup>240</sup> MSCA, A04/1010m, Nathan Goldenberg, 'The M&S Approach' (undated) p. 3.

<sup>241</sup> MSCA, P11/4/22, 'Quality Service', VHS, 1<sup>st</sup> September 1989, 01:30.

the benefits of multiple retailing was the economies of scale afforded by placing large, long-term orders with suppliers, encouraging them to invest in technological improvements and expanding their manufacturing capacity in order to further drive down product prices. The relationship between the company and its suppliers was central to their success as a food retailer, as Marks and Spencer acted as a dynamic intermediary: adapting quickly to changes in the market and the behaviour of consumers. The pivotal role of this relationship with suppliers was established during the company's rapid expansion in the interwar period. In a progress report from 1930 it was explained that 'the company is able to purchase goods on the basis of mass production at the lowest possible prices. The benefits obtained are passed on to the public in the form of improved quality of goods and lower retail selling prices.'<sup>242</sup> This was reiterated in Simon Marks' speech to shareholders during the 1934 annual general meeting:

There is no doubt that in the cost of most consumable articles a very high proportion is borne by the final process – its distribution to the public. No matter what economies could be effected by the organized production, its benefits would not be fully transferred to the consumer unless and until its distribution or marketing was properly organized and rationalized. That is what the chain store system endeavoured to carry out and why it has become so popular and firmly established in this country. It has not only kept the cost of living down, it has increased the standard of life of the people in this country and has stimulated employment.<sup>243</sup>

Marks drew direct links between the mechanisms of multiple retailing and the demands of consumers. He saw the 'chain store system' as facilitating not only better

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<sup>242</sup> 'A Year's Progress, April 1929 - March 1930'.

<sup>243</sup> 'Marks and Spencer, Limited', *The Times*, 19<sup>th</sup> May 1934, p. 20.

values for customers, but also in driving forward standards of living in the interwar period. An undated report on 'The M&S Approach' by Nathan Goldenberg explained both the link between quality and value and the role of suppliers in achieving lower prices:

It is important to ensure that our lines are of good value as they are of high quality. Our Suppliers have co-operated closely to achieve this. Values have been improved in recent years by simplification of production and mechanisation with consequent reduction in labour costs.<sup>244</sup>

The company and their suppliers were utilising technological advances in food production techniques in order to increase the affordability of their products.

Marks and Spencer responded directly and overtly to changes in consumer demands for affordability at various points in period in question through the use of special offers. During the 1970s and 1980s, Marks and Spencer policy documents made frequent reference to the changes in cost of living which was affecting their customers, from the cost of oil to periods of economic recession. In a policy meeting in 1980, Marcus Sieff discussed the 'present situation' of the oil crisis and how the company might respond to this to better improve their competitive standing in the market and deliver affordable products to consumers. At this time, it was decided that a drive to lower the prices of products across the company's offering would be the most appropriate action. Explaining that '[o]ver the past few months a number of factors beyond our control have helped to make trading difficult' including increased oil prices, associated increases in the cost of transport, packaging material and

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<sup>244</sup> Goldenberg, 'The M&S Approach', p. 5.

energy cost, alongside higher VAT. Sieff told employees attending the meeting that ‘THE PRICE RISES ARE NOT INEVITABLE. THERE ARE A NUMBER OF POSTIVE AND EFFECTIVE ACTIONS WE CAN AND MUST TAKE TO REMAIN COMPETITIVE AND ACHIEVE MODERATE SUCCESS’.<sup>245</sup> Within the directives set out by Sieff in this document, there was a strong sense of the role that Marks and Spencer’s relationship with suppliers played in its ability to respond directly to external changes in industry and in consumer behaviour with regards to affordability:

Our manufacturers, who have been through this sort of trade conditions with us before, know sometimes better than we do, that nothing stimulates sales and clears stocks better than a genuine New Lower Price. They know that this can result in improved production runs for them in future.<sup>246</sup>

The company was working closely with their manufacturers during a time of increased cost of living for their customers and increased cost of operations to bring down the price of its products in order to create affordability for consumers. It was able to wield significant influence within their negotiations of suppliers and set the terms of agreements on price due to its position in the industry as a multiple retailer with large purchasing power.

The final area in which multiple retailers were responding to consumer demands, and actively shaping their retailing strategies to meet changes in consumer behaviour, was in delivering convenience. This was manifest in three separate ways: convenience in the stores themselves, through the use of innovative retailing practices like self-service; the geographical convenience of store locations, and

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<sup>245</sup> Marcus Sieff, ‘Policy meeting’, p. 10.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

increasing the convenience of products at the point of final preparation by the customer. This final point will be discussed in further detail in chapter 6 as part of a case study of chilled ready meals. In-store convenience was an increasingly important part of the strategies of multiple retailers as the twentieth century progressed. Frequently influenced by successes and innovations in American retailing and strongly linked to ideas of shopping as entertainment and a leisure activity, British multiple retailers began to make convenience a central part of their store planning in the early post-war period. The emergence of self-service in the mid-twentieth century was a major innovation in food retailing and helped to deliver convenience for consumers. Shaw, Curth and Alexander saw this primarily as an example of the influence of American retail practices, where they argued that '[i]n early post-war Britain the Americanisation of retailing was very much represented by the coming of self-service methods and especially the development of the supermarket'.<sup>247</sup> Within Marks and Spencer, self-service was viewed partly as a method for increasing the profitability of the food department and more efficient use of labour, rather than seen simply in terms of increasing convenience for their customers. In a 1962 report on store development it was explained that 'in Foods, where all lines - other than fruit - are individually wrapped, customers make their own free selection from the whole range, assisted by a basket for multiple purchases, and move finally to a central point for payment'. The report went on to detail how:

Foods have been moved in some 100 stores to positions which facilitate handling from intake to counters. In such moves an attempt has been made to form a block layout which gives emphasis to the Food Group. The setting of

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<sup>247</sup> Shaw, Curth & Alexander, 'Selling Self-Service and the Supermarket', p. 569.

grouped registers at a central point of payment will enable more flexible use of staff to suit slack and busy periods.<sup>248</sup>

Whilst the introduction of self-service in Marks and Spencer food department was undoubtedly a response to changes in the way that people shopped, and an accompanying impetus to keep pace with their competitors, the way in which this retail innovation was conceived of within the policy decision-making process instead placed emphasis on the savings which could be made by the reduced need for labour and the opportunities for increasing profitability for the company itself.

However, five years later, in 1967, a training guide given to new staff members asked employees: 'How can the personal note be introduced into service on the food section?'<sup>249</sup> It was explained that 'customers notice and appreciate any little courtesy or thoughtfulness shown. Is this perhaps because they are pleasantly surprised to come across a personal interest in these days when self service stores are everywhere?'<sup>250</sup> Whilst keeping up with innovations in food retailing practices within the industry and having self-service stores, Marks and Spencer was attempting to differentiate the quality of the service customers received and viewed the move away from counter service as a process of de-personalisation within the way that consumers experienced food shopping. Rees described the company as:

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<sup>248</sup> MSCA, HO/10/2/3/2/3, I.H. Hyman, 'Store Development', 31<sup>st</sup> March 1962.

<sup>249</sup> MSCA, E6/4/118, Training Guide, 'Service on Foods', leaflet (April, 1967) p.1.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1.

essentially a simple business, in which, throughout the years, every effort has consciously been made to restrain to a minimum the bureaucratic and impersonal forces, which tend to grow within any large organisations.<sup>251</sup>

Some evidence for Rees' assertion is found in the way in which the Marks and Spencer recognised the commercial opportunities afforded by the installation of self-service but was also training its employees to retain and further develop some of the elements and functions of pre-war retailing in the way that they passed on information to consumers in the store. The training guide explained this 'from a customer's point of view': "That girl was right ... it's a lovely crisp apple ..."

Passing on information is one way within everyone's reach of making contact with customers and showing a personal interest. It does much to build goodwill.<sup>252</sup> This was reiterated in the chairman's speech to shareholders in 1972:

The knowledge of customers' requirements and their reaction to new lines is the essential information on which our business depends. In the kind of organisation we aim to be, there is no substitute for the seeing eye, the hearing ear and friendly, personal contact between staff and customers. The sales assistant always remains the most vital link between the Company and the customer.<sup>253</sup>

Marks and Spencer thus saw their shop employees as a vital component in the company's relationship with consumers. It was training staff to play a key role in informing customers about the food products on sale and, in this way, can be seen to

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<sup>251</sup> Rees, p. 84.

<sup>252</sup> 'Service on Foods', p.3.

<sup>253</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1972, p. 9.

have been continuing the retailing practices from pre-war experiences of food shopping alongside the technological innovations which consumers were beginning to expect of a food retailer, such as self-service. However, by the 1980s the 'personal interest' employees were expected to show in customers began to diminish as a central strategy of their retailing practices as convenience came increasingly to the fore. In April 1980 Marcus Sieff declared that:

It is our aim further to simplify our methods of selling by having all our lines prepacked and none sold by weight. Food racks and gondolas give better displays, make more effective use of selling space and provide a simple form of self service. This leads to a larger turnover without an increase in selling staff.<sup>254</sup>

It is evident that the move towards self-service by multiple retailers led to subsequent innovations in the packaging of products. A research paper from the *Food Processing & Packaging* journal in 1963, preserved in the food research papers at the Marks and Spencer company archive, explained that bacon curers had been exploring vacuum packing of sliced bacon and that 'the increasing number of self-service shops retailing convenience foods of this kind ensures their continued interest'.<sup>255</sup> Thus, a change in retailing practices of multiple retailers, itself a response to changes in consumer demands for convenience, spurred a wealth of subsequent innovations in methods and means by which food was sold and packaged.

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<sup>254</sup> Marcus Sieff, 'Appreciation of the Food Division', p. 2.

<sup>255</sup> MSCA, Q5/19/3, A.G. Kitchell and M. Ingram [Low Temperature Research Station, Cambridge], 'Vacuum packed sliced Wiltshire bacon', *Food Processing & Packaging* (January, 1963) p. 3.



One of the key ways in which the introduction of self-service food retailing changed the strategies of multiple retailers was an increased concern over the topography of the store. The layout of stores and the way in which they were navigated by consumers was increasingly driven by a demand for convenience, alongside longer-standing ideas such as attractive presentation and display of products. In 1964 the topography of the store was most strongly influenced by a desire on the part of Marks and Spencer's senior leadership team to increase efficiency and productivity, rather than ideas about consumer convenience. In a report on store development, it was explained that 'the development of tiered counters continued actively in 1963/4 resulting in further improvements in display techniques and yielding a more productive use of space'.<sup>256</sup> The report noted that all stores were equipped with 4-tier side counters and gondola islands, whilst 82 stores had recently been equipped with refrigerated cabinets. However, by the late-1970s, the experience of consumers was at the forefront of discussions on store layout. Speaking at the World's Poultry Science Association in Tel Aviv in 1978, food technologist Peel Holroyd described the company's decision-making process when considering the topography and layout of their food departments:

The display area allocated in a store will depend on the performance relative to other meats, which in turn is governed by the customer's decision to buy or not to buy a particular product. The products stocked, therefore, must generate a demand and if poultry is one, it is important that the customer requirements are consistently honoured by the retailer.<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> 'A report on store development. Built 1963/4, Work for 1964/5, Further properties for future programmes', p. 3.

<sup>257</sup> MSCA, Q5/17/14, P.H. Holroyd, Senior Poultry Technologist, Marks and Spencer Ltd., 'The Requirement of the Retailer and Consumer', presented at Israel Branch of the World's Poultry Science Association, National Conference, Tel-Aviv, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1978, p.1.

Holroyd's description of the prioritisation of consumer demand and its influence in the layout of products in the food departments at Marks and Spencer stores indicates that this was an area of retail history in which the company was directly responding to the needs of their customers and allowing these needs to dictate the topography of their stores. This was further built upon as a strategy in the chairman's 1980 address to managers, where it was established that a priority in stores was 'laying out the store to suit the customer and not ourselves, e.g. linking related merchandise together'.<sup>258</sup> However, by the end of the period in question the topography of the store and the idea of consumer convenience as conceptualised in relation to store navigation had undergone further transformation. Instead of simply responding to changes in consumer demands, Marks and Spencer was using store layout as a tool with which to directly influence the behaviour of consumers. In a 1982 training video produced for 'M&S Canada' by the training department, which focused on food display techniques, the importance of store topography in shaping the way in which consumers experienced food shopping in their stores was outlined. Employees were told that 'the displays of major lines should reflect their importance within the catalogue. In other words, the bestselling lines displayed in the best place on the counter... The best positions are those which are easily seen by customers'.<sup>259</sup> The video differentiated between ambient counters, where the most prominent position was described as the top two shelves, and chilled equipment, where the well of the fridge and the shelf immediately above were explained to be the prime positions. As discussed in the introduction of this thesis, it is important to note that it is not possible to access the store plans in the company's business archive due to safety

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<sup>258</sup> 'Notes from the Chairman's Address at the Managers' Meetings on Wednesday February 6th, 13th and 20th, 29th January 1980', p. 8.

<sup>259</sup> MSCA, P10/1/770, 'Food Display Techniques', VHS (1982).

concerns. Therefore a study of the topography of the stores necessarily depends upon descriptions of layouts by company employees within policy and store planning documents. From discussions with Marks and Spencer company archive staff, who have access to this material, it is understood that archival material relating to store layouts include the topographical information such as the layouts of racks on the shop floor, but do not detail which items should be located where. However, within the available sources which discuss this issue, it is evident that ideas of convenience in store topography changed during the twentieth century from an initial policy to satisfy consumer demands for self-service and the personal convenience of shoppers to becoming a method by which Marks and Spencer could influence and shape the behaviour of consumers in order to encourage spending on 'major lines', which commonly the most profitable or new items in the store's catalogue.

The second method by which multiple retailers responded to consumer demands for convenience was in their planning of store locations. In the 1930s, the geographical spread of Marks and Spencer stores was broadly described as 'a chain of 131 large stores and shops in London, its suburbs, and many of the Provincial towns in Great Britain'.<sup>260</sup> By the 1940s, the policy of the company with regards to store locations was to open stores in towns and cities in Britain which had the highest population densities. An essay held in the archive from 1944, which considers the retail history of the company in the preceding years, explained that 'it was the object[ive] of the firm not to open a branch in every city and township, but only in those centres which

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<sup>260</sup> 'A Year's Progress, April 1929 - March 1930'.

comprised or served a considerable population'.<sup>261</sup> This was reiterated in Simon Marks' speech during the 1954 annual general meeting, where he told shareholders: 'We plan to extend and develop many of our present stores which, as you know, are situated in the best positions in the major towns throughout the country.'<sup>262</sup> The longevity of this strategy appears to be confirmed by a report from Marks and Spencer's Building Group in 1961 which features a detailed breakdown of urban population changes drawn from the 1961 Population Census.<sup>263</sup> Each location featured notes on road mileage to the nearest Marks and Spencer store. Thus, it was in the interests of the company to be as accessible as possible to the greatest densities of the population. However, this was primarily a financially-motivated issue of retail coverage rather than a philanthropic exercise in convenience. This was particularly obvious when decisions were made to shut down stores, such as the closure of the Kentish Town Marks and Spencer store in 1980. It was explained in a press release that the store, which had opened in 1931, had ceased trading as it had 'continued to trade unprofitably for some years despite considerable efforts to make it a viable unit, by improving and varying the range of goods on sale'.<sup>264</sup> It may therefore be argued that with regard to consumer convenience in terms of geographical locations and store planning, the company was motivated by a complex negotiation of store profitability and proximity to towns and cities with the greatest population densities.

The retailing practices of Marks and Spencer in the interwar period, understood as part of the wider experience of multiple retailing in the early twentieth century, are

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<sup>261</sup> Silverman, 'An Essay in Distributive Economy, Marks and Spencer, September 1894 - September 1944', p. 13.

<sup>262</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1954, p. 7.

<sup>263</sup> Hyman, 'Store Development', Building Group, 1961 Population Census.

<sup>264</sup> MSCA, HO/3/1/3/1/3, 'News from Marks & Spencer', 4<sup>th</sup> January 1980.

an element of retail history for which change, rather than continuity, was the prevailing force. However, the strategies developed in the 1930s were remarkable for their continuity over the next fifty years. The business and retail histories of these individual companies and the food industry as a whole were intrinsically linked to the changes in consumer behaviours and in the wider social history of the period. The very nature of shopping for food shifted from being a necessity, and at times a chore, which was carried out in small independent retailers to a form of entertainment and leisure activity which took place in the increasingly large stores of these multiple retailers in densely populated towns and cities across Britain. At the beginning of this period Marks and Spencer was responding directly to changes in consumer demands for variety, quality and affordability. It was utilising innovations in food selling, through the introduction of self-service, packaging and display. The company's relationship with its suppliers was vital in allowing Marks and Spencer to act as a dynamic intermediary, reacting quickly to changes in both the types of food products that consumers were demanding and how consumers were shopping for food. It continued to build upon these retailing practices, as the company became increasingly established within the British food retailing industry. By building a reputation as a trustworthy retailer of high quality produce, and one which offered consumers a carefully selected variety of goods at affordable prices, the company was then able to leverage its reputation and position in the market in order to influence consumers and change the way they shopped for food within its stores. Marks and Spencer's focus on building and developing its relationship with both customers and suppliers was fundamental to the success of subsequent innovations which were to take place in the period 1950 - 1980.

## Chapter 4 - Hygienic practices

In his 1969 history of Marks and Spencer Goronwy Rees proclaimed that, through its research and development practices, the company had created an ‘almost revolutionary hygienic code’.<sup>265</sup> This chapter problematizes the issue of hygiene in the social history of food consumption in twentieth-century Britain and explores its place in the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer. The prevalence of primary sources which discuss hygienic practices in the company’s archive is indicative of the significance and longevity of this issue within their history as a food retailer. Hygiene was the first of a series of retailing strategies which established the company’s reputation as a trustworthy and innovative retailer of food. It formed an integral part of the process by which responsibilities for food safety, knowledge and preparation transferred from consumers to retailers. The study of ‘hygiene’ as a major theme in British food retailing in the post-war period is of historical importance because it affords an opportunity to situate retailing practices and consumer behaviours within the wider context of British social history. This chapter argues that the hygienic practices of Marks and Spencer were successful in building upon the momentum of both advancements in scientific research and a contemporary mind-set which prioritised progress and modernity, typified by events such as the Festival of Britain in 1951. The company was well placed to take advantage of these developments because of its continued emphasis on the more progressive dimensions of food technologies.

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<sup>265</sup> Rees, p. 200.

Whilst the company sold a small range of food before the Second World War,<sup>266</sup> it was not until the appointment of Nathan Goldenberg as Technical Executive and Chief Chemist to the Food Division in 1948 that Marks and Spencer began to invest in food research and development.<sup>267</sup> At this time Britain was still subject to food rationing.<sup>268</sup> Food rationing ceased in 1954 so, in the early days of the company's food retail operation, both consumers and retailers were subject to restrictions on the types and quantities of food products that could be purchased.<sup>269</sup> The 1950s was a decade of contrasts. Beginning under Clement Attlee's Labour government, the creation of the welfare state and the fulfilment of the Beveridge Report had brought about rapid changes to the social and political landscape. This included expanded provision of social housing, free secondary schooling for all and the implementation of National Insurance and National Assistance.<sup>270</sup> The creation of the National Health Service, officially introduced by then Secretary of State for Health Aneurin Bevan in 1948, was indicative of the growing importance of public health and preventative medicine on the political agenda.

The rest of the decade was seen out under subsequent Conservative governments, first through the re-election of Winston Churchill with the help of the National Liberals, then by Anthony Eden and Harold Macmillan respectively. In his 1957 speech to a Conservative rally in Bedford, Macmillan famously proclaimed that

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<sup>266</sup> Marks and Spencer Checking Lists from 1939 detail the sale of a small range of confectionary, biscuits, cakes, canned goods, meat and fish pastes, table jellies and pickles. See MSCA, E13/1/14 - 23.

<sup>267</sup> Marcus Sieff, *Don't Ask the Price: the Memoirs of the President of Marks & Spencer* (London: Guild Publishing, 1987) p. 99.

<sup>268</sup> Peter Hennessy, *Having It So Good: Britain in the Fifties* (London: Penguin, 2007) p. 8.

<sup>269</sup> For a detailed list of typical adult weekly rations and the dates individual consumable items came off the ration list see Jane Fearnley-Whittingstall and the Imperial War Museum, *Ministry of Food: Thrifty Wartime Ways to Feed Your Family Today* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2010) pp. 90 - 91.

<sup>270</sup> Hennessy, *Having It So Good*, p. 23.

Britain had ‘never had it so good’.<sup>271</sup> A period which had begun with rapid change in social welfare provisions ended with a triumphant declaration of British prosperity. This highlights the prominence of public health and social welfare issues during this period alongside the rising fortunes of British industry and increases in standards of living. In many ways, these issues find reflection in the experiences of Marks and Spencer as a food retailer during this period. The company’s hygienic practices, with their roots in the scientific advancements of the late nineteenth century and the contemporary context of modernity and progress, were to be the first in a series of retailing innovations with a definite strategic focus, which played a role in transforming the experiences of British consumers after the 1950s.

One of Goldenberg’s first projects in the food department was to create a ‘Hygienic Food Handling’ manual in 1949. Whilst the original copy of this manual is not held in the Marks and Spencer archive, a later edition from 1953 is available.<sup>272</sup> The basic premise of the company’s hygiene policy was to create a set of rules for their staff to follow which would ensure that standards of food hygiene would be maintained at the highest level, both in the company’s canteens and in their food retailing operations. This included strict guidelines on the behaviour of employees including personal hygiene, hand washing, wearing the correct uniform (including hairnets), reporting of illness, careful management of cuts and burns. It also encompassed the careful food storage, preparation and instructions for diligence around time limits for

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<sup>271</sup> Harold Macmillan, as quoted in his biography on the Cabinet Papers section of the National Archive website [accessed online at [www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/cabinet-gov/harold-macmillan-1957.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/cabinetpapers/cabinet-gov/harold-macmillan-1957.htm) on 23rd June 2011].

<sup>272</sup> MSCA, A04/1076 11C, ‘Hygienic Food Handling’ (1953).



the safety and freshness of foodstuffs. In the second edition of the manual, Nathan Goldenberg recalled that:

I reported my impressions [of poor hygienic standards] to the Chairman, who declared that we as a firm should take a lead in this field. He declared that we should try to reach the highest standards in our stores and that we should take as our motto - 'Cleanliness in catering is a measure of efficiency'.<sup>273</sup>

Goldenberg declared that the company had a genuine interest in the concept of hygiene from the outset and was striving to become a pioneer in this field. In 1951 Goldenberg set up a Hygiene Advisory Committee in Marks and Spencer, which met every two to three months, whose purpose was to 'maintain and improve cleanliness and hygiene in all sections of Stores, canteens and offices'.<sup>274</sup> This work on hygienic food handling in its own stores later shaped the company's dealings with suppliers. When engaging with food manufacturers, Marks and Spencer used exacting product specifications which explicitly stated its standards for the hygienic preparation and handling of food products.<sup>275</sup>

Primary material from the Marks and Spencer archive and the chairman's reviews suggest that the company's 'Hygienic Food Handling' manual was well-received by their suppliers, the wider food industry and public health bodies. Discussing the manual at the company's annual general meeting in 1950, Simon Marks explained that:

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<sup>273</sup> 'Hygienic Food Handling' (1953) p. iv.

<sup>274</sup> MSCA, A94/1010N, Nathan Goldenberg, 'Hygiene Review of 1963' (March, 1964) p. 1.

<sup>275</sup> For example see MSCA, '1971 Crop Specially Washed Greek Shade Dried Vostizza Currants. Specification for Marks & Spencer Ltd., Quality' (1971); Q5/12/2, 'Visit to Iran: October 1968' (1968) appendix II.

Cleanliness and hygiene in food preparation and handling are constantly presented as a social responsibility to our suppliers of food products and to our staff. To help them appreciate and understand what is involved, we have, during the past year, published a practical manual on 'Hygienic Food Handling'.

Although primarily intended for use within our own organisation, it has been welcomed as a real contribution to this problem by public health bodies and by national and industrial organisations interested in this matter.<sup>276</sup>

Marks thus defined hygiene as a specific social responsibility for those involved in the production and retail of food, indicating that he perceived of the company playing a role in educating not only their staff, but also their suppliers with regards to hygienic practices. Marks' speech is indicative of an early and informal sense of corporate social responsibility within the company, which was framed within a public health context with the issue of hygiene.<sup>277</sup> Marks also indicated that the company's work had been viewed externally as a genuine advance in the promotion of food hygiene standards.

In 1956 the company published a special 'Hygiene Extra' edition of *St Michael News*. This included a direct discussion of the 'Hygienic Food Handling' manual and its reception. The Deputy County Medical Officer of Oxfordshire is quoted as saying that 'the company is to be congratulated on its fastidious care in food preparation and handling'. The Department of Health for Scotland is reported as saying of the manual: 'it should prove of great value not only to your own staff but also to the

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<sup>276</sup> 'Marks & Spencer Ltd Company Meeting Reports and Statements', *Economist*, 1<sup>st</sup> July 1950, p. 52.

<sup>277</sup> Stanley Chapman has considered the social responsibilities of the company within the context of networks of food supply and distribution. See Stanley Chapman, 'Socially Responsible Supply Chains: Marks & Spencer in Historical Perspective', research paper series, International Centre for Corporate Social Responsibility, University of Nottingham, no. 26 (2004).

officers of Local Authorities'. Finally, a quote from the British Council explained that they '... shall be glad to include [the manual] in British Medical Book List'.<sup>278</sup>

These quotes were evidently selected by Marks and Spencer in order to convey a sense of a positive reception for the manual and suggest that the company was taking an influential role at the forefront of discussions of food hygiene. Indeed, in quoting the British Council they may have been attempting to infer that the manual was influential on the global stage. In 1956 Hilda M. Clark, then librarian of the Medical Department of the British Council, explained that the aim of the British Medical book list was to make 'new British medical literature known abroad'.<sup>279</sup>

Nevertheless, these quotes would seem to lend weight to the concept of hygiene as being a real concern for the company and to an understanding of their position as a food retailing playing a significant role in this burgeoning field.

The developments in hygienic practice in the immediate post-war period were followed by a 'Clean Food and Clean Stores' campaign in 1960, which reinforced the original guidelines from the 1949 manual. The reception of this campaign by medical professionals was overwhelmingly positive. For example, a contemporary report from the *Nursing Times*, an official publication of the Royal College of Nursing, suggests that the work of this campaign had a far-reaching influence and was widely respected. In a special edition entitled 'Hygiene in a Store' a writer for the *Nursing Times* noted:

It is strange, and rather shocking, to think that a chain store might be able to teach hospitals anything about hygiene, but it is true that Marks & Spencer

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<sup>278</sup> 'Hygiene Extra' edition of *St Michael News*, no. 6 (August, 1956) p. 4.

<sup>279</sup> Hilda M. Clark, 'The Work of the British Council Medical Library and its Relation to Other Activities of the Council', *Bulletin of the Medical Library Association*, vol. 44, no. 2 (1956) p. 116.

recently had a letter from the catering officer of a large hospital saying that he had never seen a fly in their stores and would they please pass on the ‘know-how’ as he had not succeeded in that battle. We all read about the doctor who wrote ‘Dirt is Dangerous’ on a ward wall with his finger. He couldn’t do that in Marks & Spencer.<sup>280</sup>

As discussed in chapter 1, Simon Marks drew attention to the company’s hygienic practices in his contribution to the House of Lords debate on the Molony Committee’s report in 1962. Marks explained that:

Much can be done by attention to common-sense standards of cleanliness and to the principle: ‘Clean as you go’. Infestation of all kinds can be eliminated both by attention to cleanliness and by effective measures such as the screening of doors and windows to keep out flies; and also by the use of suitable methods of disinfection against rodents and other vermin.<sup>281</sup>

In doing so, he can be seen to have been drawing public attention to what he considered to be the company’s pioneering work on food hygiene as part of this campaign and seeking to position Marks and Spencer at the forefront of developments in consumer protections. Certainly, the company was acutely aware of the legislative frameworks which shaped its practices as a food retailer. One of the key roles of the Hygienic Food Committee established by Goldenberg in 1951 was to review this legislation and keep the company up-to-date on food regulations. In a report on hygiene in 1963 Goldenberg explained how the committee examined legislation such as the Food Hygiene Regulations of 1959/61 and found that ‘our

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<sup>280</sup> ‘Hygiene in a Store’, *Nursing Times* (1960) p. 2.

<sup>281</sup> HL Deb, 14 November 1962, vol. 244, c. 656.

own standards had largely anticipated their provisions and went even further'.<sup>282</sup>

Rees' commissioned history of the company concurred with this view, arguing that:

'They probably set the highest standards in such matters that obtained anywhere in Britain.'<sup>283</sup> This is reiterated and expanded upon in the modern-day communications of the company, as their website claims: 'We set our standards to exceed typical industry hygiene standards, and as a result, are confident we have the highest in the world.'<sup>284</sup> Studying the company's hygienic practices provides an opportunity to examine how it operated within the regulatory framework of food retailing. Marks and Spencer was able to levy its investment in research in order to take an instrumental role in setting the terms of debate in food legislation in Britain in the twentieth century. This, in turn, served to develop its reputation as a trustworthy retailer of food, working at the forefront of changes in the industry.

A key element of Marks and Spencer's hygienic food handling practices was the strict guidelines for the timeframes in which foods could be sold to customers to ensure their quality and safety. The 'Hygienic Food Handling' manual provided detailed explanations on how to store particular foods, such as bakery lines, chocolate and fresh fruit. One of the most significant inclusions in the manual can be found in the 1953 edition, where it was noted that sandwiches 'must be sold out on the date of making; they must not be kept overnight and any that are left over at the end of the day must be disposed of on that day'.<sup>285</sup> This predated the regulation of best before dates by twenty seven years. The use of durability indicators such as best

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<sup>282</sup> Goldenberg, 'Hygiene Review of 1963', p. 2.

<sup>283</sup> Rees, p. 200.

<sup>284</sup> [www.marksandspencer.com/Food-Manufacturing-Our-Food-Policies-About-our-Food-MS-Food-Food-Wine/b/46528031](http://www.marksandspencer.com/Food-Manufacturing-Our-Food-Policies-About-our-Food-MS-Food-Food-Wine/b/46528031) [accessed on 19<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

<sup>285</sup> 'Hygienic Food Handling' (1953) p. 23.

before dates was introduced into law under the Food Labelling Regulations 1980.<sup>286</sup>

Marks and Spencer took a leading role in the British food industry with their work on best before dates and hygienic practices, using their work in food hygiene to drive and shape public policy. This is reflected in recent journalistic research into modern food safety advice.<sup>287</sup> An article in the *Guardian* in 2009 explained that:

The humble sell-by date actually has a surprisingly short history. It was introduced in Marks & Spencer's storerooms in the 1950s before making its way on to the shelves in 1970. It wasn't even actually called a 'sell-by-date' until 1973. Marks is so proud of its innovation that Twiggy trumpets it in their latest ad campaign.<sup>288</sup>

The company are thus recognised as having had a leading role in this aspect of food safety in the twentieth century. It had invested significant resources in developing an innovative approach to hygienic practices and often pre-dated and went further than food regulations. Its work on establishing best before dates for food products focused on both food safety and food quality.

The issue of hygiene became a pervasive theme in the in-house and public communications of the company throughout the following decades. It formed a cornerstone of the work of the food department, with discussions of the maintenance of high hygienic standards informing all aspects of their work, from product development to the company's engagement with suppliers. It played a role in

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<sup>286</sup> They are currently held under the EU Food Information for Consumers (FIC) Regulations 2011, which is transposed into national law under the Food Information Regulations (FIR) 2014. This information came from a response by the Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs to an email query sent in March 2015.

<sup>287</sup> "'Best-before' is well past its sell-by date", *Telegraph*, 12<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

<sup>288</sup> 'Has 'best before' reached its sell-by date?', *Guardian*, 16<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

shaping the way the company utilised new technologies, with product testing being carried out to determine bacteriological standards of products such as canned ham.<sup>289</sup>

For Goldenberg, hygienic food handling was ‘a combination of common-sense and technology – and much more common sense than technology’.<sup>290</sup> Research into the hygienic standards of food also cut across the work of departments, with the food development team working with the Product Engineering Section to find ways of reducing the presence of foreign bodies in foodstuffs through the use of metal detectors in the 1960s.<sup>291</sup> Hygiene was an issue which shaped the work of the company as a whole, beyond the food department and the store employees.

Hygiene was a frequent theme of the speeches of Marks and Spencer chairmen during the company’s annual meetings. The longevity of this issue within these public speeches to shareholders clearly shows the importance of hygiene within the company’s long-term food retailing strategies. The chairman’s reviews often used hygiene as a way of discussing both its relationship with suppliers and its understanding of the expectations of customers. Simon Mark’s 1954 speech served as a prime example of this where he announced that:

High standards of cleanliness and hygiene are a social responsibility for all concerned in the food business. We strive to set an example in our own stores. I am glad to say that our suppliers are equally aware of the importance of hygiene in the manufacture of foodstuffs. We have pioneered and developed the clean and simple packaging of foodstuffs in transparent film. This is much

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<sup>289</sup> MSCA, Q5/38/1, N. Goldenberg, C.G. Sheppey and J.N. Robson, ‘Some tentative bacteriological standards for canned hams’, *1er Symposium International de Bacteriologie Alimentaire*, Annales de l’institut pasteur de Lille (1955).

<sup>290</sup> MSCA, Q5/38/6, Nathan Goldenberg, ‘Hygienic Food Production in Bakeries’ (1965) p. 1.

<sup>291</sup> MSCA, A04/1010 O, Nathan Goldenberg, ‘Developments in Food Factory Hygiene 1962 - 3’ (1963) p. 1.

appreciated by our customers who can see what they are buying while being sure that the goods are not exposed to indiscriminate handling.<sup>292</sup>

Marks situated the issue of hygiene within the context of consumer behaviour, putting forward the view that customers were responding positively to the advances the company had made in hygienic food packaging. The packaging of products, including the transparent film mentioned by Marks, was included in product specifications for food items.<sup>293</sup> The company invested significant resources into packaging research, with an emphasis on maintaining the hygiene and safety of their products along with ensuring freshness and quality, and was a member of the Packaging and Printing Research Association.<sup>294</sup> The importance of hygiene in the priorities of Marks and Spencer's food retailing operations was maintained throughout the period in question. In the 1965 chairman's review, it was explained that:

The problem of ensuring the production of our foodstuffs under the most hygienic and clean conditions is constantly before us. We have a specially trained team of experts who visit our suppliers regularly so as to help them in solving the problems of hygiene with which they may be faced. This is an important aspect of our food business.<sup>295</sup>

The company was investing significant resources in ensuring hygiene standards were maintained both in its own stores and in the factories of its suppliers. As the process of food distribution became increasingly complex during the twentieth century, with developments such as the evolution of cold chain storage as will be discussed further

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<sup>292</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1954, p. 6.

<sup>293</sup> MSCA, Q5/41/4, Nathan Goldenberg, 'Cake Packaging', 4th National Conference Institute of Packaging (1962) p. 96.

<sup>294</sup> MSCA, Q5/41/3, Nathan Goldenberg, 'Development of Quality Standards and the use of technologists by suppliers' (1961) p. 2.

<sup>295</sup> *Chairman's Review*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1965, p. 3.



in chapter 6, the company benefitted from the hygienic practices it had established in the 1940s. The last time the chairman's AGM address directly discussed hygiene was in 1977, where it was spoken of as one of the fundamental factors in the company's growth in food sales:

Our growth is due to our maintaining high quality and good value and our system of controlled temperature transport and storage with strict attention to keeping life, hygiene and freshness, which were particularly relevant during last year's very hot summer.<sup>296</sup>

Establishing strict standards for hygienic food handling at the outset of their food retailing operations was thus a key facet of Marks and Spencer's success in the latter part of the century.

The company was keen to emphasise what it considered to be the unique nature of its hygienic code. This was communicated by senior Marks and Spencer employees. In 1954 Alec Lerner, the husband of Simon Mark's daughter Hannah Marks, wrote an article which appeared in the *Transactions of the Association of Industrial Medical Officers*.<sup>297</sup> Lerner stressed the special nature of Marks and Spencer's hygienic practices and lamented, 'we have learned that one cannot long exist as an oasis of cleanliness in a desert of dirt'.<sup>298</sup> The purpose of Lerner's article was clearly to portray the company as a pioneer in this field and situate itself ahead of its

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<sup>296</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1977, p. 11.

<sup>297</sup> The Association of Industrial Medical Officers was founded in 1935 and changed its name to The Society of Occupational Medicine in 1965. They publish the journal *Occupational Medicine*.

<sup>298</sup> Alec Lerner, 'Food Hygiene in Marks & Spencer Ltd.', *Occupational Medicine*, vol. 4, no.2 (1954) p. 45.

competitors. Another example of this can be found in a report by Nathan Goldenberg in 1965 on ‘Hygienic Food Production in Bakeries’:

We are, as a firm, somewhat ‘mental’ about hygiene. That is not such a bad thing. Anybody who really believes in an idea occasionally has to put up with the criticism that they are being too fanatical about it. We do not apologise. On the contrary, we think we are right!<sup>299</sup>

However, no sources have been found which levied criticism at the company for their commitment to hygienic practices. In fact, a comparative study within the Sainsbury’s archive reveals that Marks and Spencer was not the only retailer to boast about their hygienic practices in this period. Sainsbury’s press advertisements between 1939 and 1946 made frequent declarations about the ‘clean’ frozen peas sold in stores. In 1951 an advert appeared in the *East Grinstead Observer* in which Sainsbury claimed to have the ‘most modern food store in the country’. The company declared that ‘coupled with its 100 per cent hygienic conditions, there are up-to-date amenities for the staff on a scale never before provided in East Grinstead’.<sup>300</sup> The following week Sainsbury took out an advert in the *Kent & Sussex Courier* in which it claimed that their ‘new shop is most hygienic in the South’.<sup>301</sup> As at Marks and Spencer, the concept of hygiene had an enduring influence on the food retailing strategies of Sainsbury. In 1961 an article on biscuits appeared Sainsbury’s short-lived customer magazine *Family* (which was quickly superseded by the publication *Family Circle*). Speaking directly to customers in friendly first-person terms the company explained, ‘you may have noticed that all our biscuits are now sold ready-packed. This does away with open tins, keeps biscuits fresh and crisp

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<sup>299</sup> MSCA, Q5/38/6, Nathan Goldenberg, ‘Hygienic Food Production in Bakeries’, report (1965) p. 1.

<sup>300</sup> *East Grinstead Observer*, 28<sup>th</sup> September 1951.

<sup>301</sup> *Kent & Sussex Courier*, 5<sup>th</sup> October 1951.

– and, of course, is much more hygienic’.<sup>302</sup> Hygiene was therefore a concept which had a long-term impact on the practices of other British food retailers.

Hygiene played a central role in the relationship between retailers and consumers in twentieth-century food retailing practices. However the safety, purity and cleanliness of food sold by British retailers are issues with roots in the nineteenth century.

Scholarship on food adulteration often situates the safety of food within the wider context of public health. Christopher Hamlin argues that ‘modern “public health” took shape in the nineteenth century’.<sup>303</sup> Hamlin, who equates the history of public health with the history of class struggle in the early nineteenth century, points to the publication of Edwin Chadwick’s 1842 *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* as the major turning point in public health history. The Public Health Act of 1848 established the General Board of Health, which was tasked with ‘facilitating sanitary improvement’.<sup>304</sup> Hamlin calls into question the success of these changes in bringing about wholesale reforms in sanitation, pointing to the limitations of local boards of health, government inspectors and the private interests which motivated public health analysts. He does not explore issues of food adulteration in any detail, which suggests that it was only in the latter half of the nineteenth century that food safety and purity came to the forefront of legislative and public health debates. This would certainly seem to be corroborated by the historiography on food adulteration in Britain. Researchers such as John Burnett, P. J. Atkins, Michael French and Jim Philips situate their studies

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<sup>302</sup> Sainsbury company archive, SA/GC/FAM/1, *Family* magazine (Autumn, 1961) p. 55.

<sup>303</sup> Christopher Hamlin, *Public Health and Social Justice in the Age of Chadwick: Britain, 1800 - 1854* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) p. 1.

<sup>304</sup> Hamlin, *Public Health*, p. 275.

into food adulteration in the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>305</sup> The timeframe of these studies corresponds with the rise of the co-operative movement and thus the issues of food adulteration and later developments in food hygiene invite a comparison between the experiences of the co-operative societies in the nineteenth century and Marks and Spencer in the twentieth century.

To aid clarity in this discussion, it is useful to distinguish between definitions of food hygiene and food adulteration. The OED describes adulteration as ‘the action of adulterating; corruption or debasement by spurious admixture’.<sup>306</sup> Hygiene, on the other hand, is defined as ‘that department of knowledge or practice which relates to the maintenance of health; a system of principles or rules for preserving or promoting health; sanitary science’.<sup>307</sup> Understood in this way food hygiene and food adulteration can be viewed as distinct, but related, concepts. With regards to food retailing, hygiene is concerned with the promotion of public health and taking steps to prevent adulteration, whereas adulteration concerns the act of corruption; the reduction of quality and the subsequent debasement of the value of food unbeknownst to the customer. These two issues are strongly linked to notions of consumer trust. However, research by Nicole Robertson into the history of the co-operative movement would suggest that adulteration and hygiene are more closely

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<sup>305</sup> John Burnett, ‘The History of Food Adulteration in Great Britain in the Nineteenth Century, with Special Reference to Bread, Tea and Beer’ (doctoral thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, 1958); Burnett, *Plenty and Want*, chapter 5; P.J. Atkins, ‘Sophistication Detected: or, the Adulteration of the Milk Supply, 1850-1914’, *Social History*, 16 (1991) pp. 317-339; Michael French and Jim Phillips, *Cheated not Poisoned?*.

<sup>306</sup> ‘adulteration, n.’, OED Online, Oxford University Press [accessed online at <http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/2834?redirectedFrom=adulteration> on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2012].

<sup>307</sup> ‘hygiene, n.’, OED Online, Oxford University Press [accessed online at <http://0-www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/90139?redirectedFrom=hygiene> on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2012].

associated than the OED definitions propose. Robertson used publications and advertisements to explore the experience of the co-operative movement in ‘providing its customers with pure food’.<sup>308</sup> She argued: ‘A central impetus behind the establishment of the Rochdale Pioneers Society in the 1840s was to combat the problem of poor quality (and often adulterated) food.’<sup>309</sup> Their achievements in this endeavour were corroborated in the doctoral thesis of John Burnett. In his discussion of public demands for food purity, Burnett argued that ‘the outstanding success – after initial difficulties – of the pure food policy of the early co-operative stores is sufficient proof of this [public demand]’.<sup>310</sup>

Drawing upon an earlier article on food adulteration by French and Philips and Frank Trentmann’s work on consumption,<sup>311</sup> Robertson explained that the Co-operative Wholesale Society had a rigorous testing policy to ensure the quality and purity of food products they sold and they embarked on a campaign to improve the quality of milk in Britain.<sup>312</sup> The co-operative movement played a significant role in improving the quality and safety of milk supplies and saw themselves as advocating on behalf of the interests of consumers in their engagement with industry and government. The parallels between the work of the co-operative movement in the early decades of the twentieth century and Marks and Spencer in the 1950s are striking. Both retailers used their own in-house research and testing to ascertain the quality and safety of food stuffs and utilised their positions in industry to shape the legislative landscape

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<sup>308</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914 - 1960*, p. 138.

<sup>309</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement*, p. 138.

<sup>310</sup> Burnett, ‘The History of Food Adulteration’, p. 41.

<sup>311</sup> Jim Philips and Michael French, ‘Adulteration and Food Law, 1899 - 1939’, *Twentieth Century British History*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1998) pp. 350 - 369; Trentmann, ‘Bread, Milk and Democracy’, pp. 129 - 163.

<sup>312</sup> Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement*, pp. 140 - 141.

for British food consumers. However, the way in which these issues were framed differed. The late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century experience of the co-operative movement was focussed on the purity of the goods themselves whilst the 1950s saw a shift, evidenced by the retailing practices of Marks and Spencer, towards a more holistic approach to food safety which gave equal attention to the conditions in which food was manufactured, prepared and sold.

There is a further comparable factor in the experiences of the co-operative movement and Marks and Spencer, as both had somewhat unusual food retail models compared to the supermarkets and independent food stores by their selling of only own-brand products. The control which the co-operative societies were able to exert over their food supply chains to ensure the safety and quality of the products they sold was due to the wholesale arm of the movement. Marks and Spencer's own-brand products were sold as 'St Michael'. This label was applied to goods deemed to be of sufficient quality and meeting the exacting standards of the company and its then chairman Simon Marks. This use of this brand continued until 2000. As discussed in the thesis introduction, Marks and Spencer was perceived as having operated as a 'manufacturer without factories' and its exacting product specifications played a key role in both its means of controlling the products it sold and in its relationship with suppliers.<sup>313</sup> Hygienic practices and standards of food hygiene were an important requirement in the company's product specifications.

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<sup>313</sup> Tse, p. 4.

In 1963 Israel Sieff took on the role of chairing the general meeting, with Simon Marks in ill health ahead of his death the following year. Sieff became chairman in 1964. In continuing to include a dedicated section on hygiene, Sieff demonstrated the legacy of Marks's work on hygiene which suggests that, although the work of individuals in senior management positions may have been an important factor in attributing significance to the concept of hygiene, the hygienic practices of Marks and Spencer permeated throughout the company:

We and our Suppliers attach the greatest importance to hygiene and cleanliness at every stage of food production; at the factory, in transit, and at the point of sale in the stores. In the interests of public health this approach must surely be regarded as a social responsibility which devolves upon all who are concerned with food production and food handling.<sup>314</sup>

From a basic retail perspective, it made sound business sense to attempt to protect customers from harm and to be seen to be promoting public health. Not only was this linked to a wider general trend recognizing the importance of maintaining public health but, in taking steps to ensure their food was safe and hygienic, the company was able to build upon consumer trust and thereby increase sales. As a food retailer, Marks and Spencer occupied the relatively unusual position in the mid-twentieth century of exclusively selling own-brand products.<sup>315</sup> It took total control over the food it sold: from production to supply, distribution and retail. Without ownership of factories, this control was achieved through the exertion of exacting standards upon manufacturers. In his research into the social responsibilities of the company in

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<sup>314</sup> 'Marks & Spencer Ltd Company Meeting Reports and Statements', *Economist*, 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1963, p. 91.

<sup>315</sup> Marks & Spencer's food products gradually began to be sold under the company's famous trademark, 'St. Michael', from 1941. This label was used exclusively throughout their entire product range from 1956.

supply chains, Stanley Chapman argued that the company exercised ‘strict “fatherly” control of numerous manufacturer suppliers, first in textiles, later in food’.<sup>316</sup> He went on to outline the evolution of the company’s relationship with its textile suppliers:

The relationship was soon much more than a steady flow of orders. The British textile industry always consisted of a large number of small firms that, because of the established wholesaling system, had little experience of marketing, and because of lack of scientific and commercial education, too often failed to recognise new opportunities. Marks & Spencer created a Merchandise Development Department to show producers how to reduce costs, improve quality and respond to new production technology, sharing the benefits of greater efficiency with them. The heads of a handful of larger suppliers came to enjoy further benefits, notably provision of capital and new factory executives to secure the intimate relationship.<sup>317</sup>

Thus, if Marks and Spencer’s role in networks of food supply and distribution was modelled upon the company’s experiences in the textile trade, it follows that the food supply chain was similarly constructed. In by-passing the wholesaling system it was able to engage directly with individual food suppliers, educate them in the company’s research and development practice and demand total quality control from the supply-end. If a food product caused harm to a customer through a lapse in hygienic standards, the responsibility was entirely that of Marks and Spencer. Enforcing high standards of quality and hygiene in its suppliers’ practices aided the

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<sup>316</sup> Stanley Chapman, ‘Socially Responsible Supply Chains’, p. ii.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3.



maintenance of high standards for their food products, which in turn helped to encourage repeat custom, brand loyalty and built upon consumer trust.

Marks and Spencer's exacting hygienic standards also served to enable improvements in food transportation, allowing the company to meet consumer demands for quality, value, choice and, increasingly, convenience via their retailing operations. In the 1981 report on 'The Changing Role of Technology' it was noted that:

The changes which have occurred in hygiene over the past 15 years have been dramatic; yet hygiene is still regarded as a necessary but essentially a negative discipline. However, in the development of our own fresh food business it has become an increasingly positive force. We have seen the evidence through longer keeping lives or through the growth of departments such as delicatessen. But elsewhere, fresh meat can be kept for 40 days through positive hygiene and again in the States they can produce safe rare roast beef through meticulous attention to hygiene.<sup>318</sup>

The company's long-term commitment to their 'revolutionary hygienic code' allowed them to take advantage of subsequent innovation in methods of food transportation and retail. Hygiene served as a continuous principle of the company throughout the twentieth century. It was a core value which facilitated their later work in implementing new practices in supply and in bringing new products to market.

Marks and Spencer's hygienic practices made very strong commercial sense, as Tim Lang and Michael Heasman have pointed out in an article which rejects the notion of

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<sup>318</sup> 'The Changing Role of Technology', p. 36.

food retailers as philanthropic enterprises: responding to changes in consumer behaviour and acting for the promotion of public health. They argue that the post-war years saw the beginnings of a burgeoning consumer society in which ‘new ways packaging, distributing, selling, trading and cooking were developed, all to entice the consumer to purchase’.<sup>319</sup> This provides an interesting link between the wider themes of innovation, technology and consumer trust which will be raised in chapters 5 and 6 of this thesis. Marks and Spencer’s hygienic practices constituted an important facet of these ‘new ways’ of packaging, distributing and selling food in the 1950s, and were therefore important for increasing sales and making money for the company. Cleanliness in food retailing and the setting of high hygienic standards was the first in a series of strategic retailing practices which shaped the history of retailers like Marks and Spencer in the second half of the twentieth century.

The role of hygiene in the company’s relationship with suppliers also sheds light on the influence of individual management staff and serves as justification for an exploration of food history along national lines. In the commissioned text, *Marks in Time: 125 years of Marks & Spencer*, Helen Chislett described the company’s food development work. Whilst no date is provided by Chislett, the episode can be determined from the events described as occurring between 1948, when Nathan Goldenberg was appointed to the food division, and 1956, when the ‘St. Michael’ label replaced all other branding for the company’s products. Chislett explains that:

In their pursuit of developing truly high-end cakes, the food technologists also began to note the quality of dried fruit used. Suppliers brought in currants and

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<sup>319</sup> Tim Lang and Michael Heasman, *Food Wars: the Global Battle for Mouths, Minds and Markets* (London: Earthscan, 2004) p. 139.

sultanas from Australia, Turkey, mainland Greece, Crete, USA and South Africa. Turkish and Greece produce was best for appearance, texture and taste. However, these was one major disadvantage with their use: many customers complained of ‘foreign bodies’, such as stones, pieces of wood, glass, metal, thorn, stalks and all kinds of dried vegetable matter... Nat<sup>320</sup> suggested that he should visit suppliers in Greece and Turkey himself to investigate the problem ‘on the spot’. Simon Marks turned the idea down flat – that was until his own grandson broke a tooth on a piece of M&S fruit cake. Permission was granted.<sup>321</sup>

Chislett drew heavily upon the autobiography of Nathan Goldenberg to establish the basic facts of this source.<sup>322</sup> As neither Chislett nor Goldenberg cited any references for this information, it is sensible to conclude that this might not be an entirely accurate recollection. However, it does serve to highlight several significant issues. Firstly, its appearance in a specially commissioned text conveys a sense that the company was keen to promote the idea of Marks and Spencer as a family business, with the concern for Marks’s grandson being the catalyst for commencing food development research. It also suggests that the opinion of the chairman was a highly important figure in the decision-making process at the company, with ideas not carried out until Simon Marks gave his permission, even after the complaints of customers. In the context of this chapter, and specifically related to social constructs of hygiene and dirt, the most striking aspect of this source is the mention of considerably sized ‘foreign bodies’ such as stones and pieces of wood. These would most certainly have changed the consistency of the cake and, as can be understood

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<sup>320</sup> This refers to Nathan Goldenberg, the Technical Executive and Chief Chemist to the Food Division of Marks and Spencer.

<sup>321</sup> Chislett, p. 138.

<sup>322</sup> Goldenberg, *Thought for Food*, p. 36.

from this source, had the potential to cause immediate physical harm to consumers. These were ‘foreign bodies’ not only in the sense that they did not belong in the foodstuffs, but also in that they were present in ingredients produced abroad. This invites a discussion of how hygiene was being understood and constructed.

Hygiene is a socially constructed concept which is both culturally and historically specific. Taking a multi-disciplinary approach when considering the meaning and definition of hygiene in this context facilitates an engagement with the wealth of research undertaken in fields such as anthropology and sociology. The history of dirt and cleanliness has emerged as topic of discussion in historical research in the past ten years, with the work of Campkin and Cox using dirt as means of exploring both historical geographies and urban planning alongside a number of modes of analysis, such as the constructions of dirt and cleanliness as they relate to race, gender, class and the body.<sup>323</sup> An exhibition in the Wellcome Collection in 2011, and an accompanying text edited by Virginia Smith, explored the social and cultural history of dirt and disease.<sup>324</sup> Exploring how the concept of hygiene has been understood serves to enrich the understanding of the role of hygienic practices in the social history of food in twentieth-century Britain. By engaging with issues of food hygiene and playing a role in setting the terms of debate for legislation around food safety and best before dates, Marks and Spencer was taking an active role in shaping the constructs of hygiene for food consumers in twentieth-century Britain.

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<sup>323</sup> Ben Campkin and Rosie Cox, *Dirt: New Geographies of Cleanliness and Contamination* (London: Tauris, 2007).

<sup>324</sup> Virginia Smith *et al* (eds.), *Dirt: the Filthy Reality of Everyday Life* (London: Profile Books, 2011).

The anthropologist Natalie Farriss has argued, ‘for those who wished to do history from the inside out as well as from the bottom up, anthropology offered the necessary dimension of culture, the systems of meaning that people invest in their social forms’.<sup>325</sup> Most directly for the purposes of this chapter, there are clear links between the concept of hygiene and anthropological theories of dirt. In her highly influential book *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* Mary Douglas defined dirt as being ‘matter out of place’.<sup>326</sup> If one accepts Douglas’s conclusion of dirt being a culturally and socially constructed concept, it follows that hygiene is similarly constructed and therefore a fluid, rather than static concept. If dirt is an impurity within the creation of order, then hygiene is defined as dirt’s opposite: the sterilising process which minimises the amount of matter out of place and is capable of making the unclean clean again. Whilst elements of the OED definition are arguably constant, there are dimensions of meaning within the concept of hygiene which are fluid and changing. They are specific to a time and a place.

A challenge to this viewpoint has been expressed by Valerie Curtis, the Director of the Hygiene Centre at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. In 2007 Curtis defined hygiene as ‘the set of behaviours that animals, including humans, use to avoid infection’. In contrast to Douglas’s theories of dirt, Curtis argued that:

Hygiene behaviour and disgust predate culture and so cannot fully be explained as its product. The history of ideas about disease thus is neither entirely socially

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<sup>325</sup> Nancy Farriss, ‘Foreword’ in Arjun Appadurai ed., *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) p. ix.

<sup>326</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: an Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966) p. 36.

constructed nor an ‘heroic progress’ of scientists leading the ignorant into the light.<sup>327</sup>

Curtis raises the viewpoint that concepts of cleanliness are marked for their consistency throughout human history. However by referring to, and therein dismissing, hygiene as a cultural ‘product’, Curtis does not explore the opportunities offered by conceiving of hygiene as a socially constructed concept. It may be suggested that the reason for this lies in Curtis’s narrow definition of hygiene which, whilst useful for the evolutionary perspective from which she is approaching the issue, does not engage with the wide range of issues that the concept of hygiene encapsulates. Georges Vigarell’s 1988 text *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* explored the changing criteria for assessing levels of hygiene throughout French history.<sup>328</sup> Further agreement with the idea of hygiene as a socially constructed concept within the history of France can be found in the research of historian David Barnes. In his discussion of sanitation and filth in nineteenth-century Paris Barnes described dirt, and accompanying disgust, as ‘a subjective product of cultural history’.<sup>329</sup> A similar viewpoint was presented by Tomes and Warner, both historians of public health, in the introduction to a special issue in 1997 of the *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* dedicated to new research on the reception of the germ theory. Within the context of British nineteenth-century history, Tomes and Warner recognised the potential for academic debate offered by ‘treating “the germ theory of disease” as a construction’ rather

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<sup>327</sup> Valerie A Curtis, ‘Dirt, Disgust and Disease: a Natural History of Hygiene’, *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health*, 61 (2007) p. 660.

<sup>328</sup> Georges Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>329</sup> David S. Barnes, *The Great Stink of Paris and the Nineteenth-Century Struggle against Filth and Germs* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006) p. 254.

than a static historical actor in its own right.<sup>330</sup> In Rosie Cox's exploration of the history of dirt in the domestic setting, which primarily focussed on the nineteenth century, she argued that 'what is "clean" and what is "dirty" is defined in historical and social context'.<sup>331</sup>

Marks and Spencer's work on hygienic food handling practices was strongly linked to contemporary cultural connections with the word 'hygiene' and its origins. Whilst dimensions of meaning in the concept of hygiene are historically and culturally specific, there are elements of its definition which provide continuity and have deep origins. The idea that food could be either hygienic or unhygienic was not new in the 1950s. The evolution of Germ Theory throughout the nineteenth century, Pasteur's work on microorganisms in the 1860s and Lister's experiments in the 1870s were all based on various manifestations of the concept of hygiene.

Further evidence for this can be found in the sources used by Yuriko Akiyama in *Feeding the Nation: Nutrition and Health in Britain before World War One*. The Ladies' National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge, founded in early 1857, attempted to start a college of hygiene and household science. In 1829 new hygiene and physiology extensions were added to the King's College London Sanitary Science course. Hygiene was also endorsed as a subject in its own right by the Education Code, a precursor to the subsequent national curriculum, in 1879.<sup>332</sup> A particularly prominent example of the ubiquity of the word hygiene in the early

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<sup>330</sup> Nancy J. Tomes, and John Harley Warner, 'Introduction to Special Issue on Rethinking the Reception of the Germ Theory of Disease: Comparative Perspectives', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 52 (1997) p. 9.

<sup>331</sup> Rosie Cox, 'Dishing the Dirt: Dirt in the Home' in Smith *et al* (eds.), *Dirt: the Filthy Reality of Everyday Life*, p. 38.

<sup>332</sup> Yuriko Akiyama, *Feeding the Nation: Nutrition and Health in Britain before World War One* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 2008) pp. 22 - 35.

twentieth century was the Royal Charter granted to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine in 1924. The school began life in 1899 as the London School of Tropical Medicine and later merged with the Hospital of Tropical Diseases.<sup>333</sup> The addition of ‘hygiene’ to its name seems in accord with notions of disease prevention, burgeoning interests in public health ahead of the Beveridge Report in 1942, and therein the social construction of hygiene and dirt. Beyond the specific British context, the popularity of the International Hygiene Exhibition held in Dresden in 1911 lends support to the argument that dimensions of the definition of ‘hygiene’ conjured familiar pre-war ideas of cleanliness. The exhibition received over five million visitors and was turned into a permanent German Hygiene Museum in Dresden. A second event took place in 1930, evoking and building upon the importance of the language of hygiene in pre-1939 European societies.<sup>334</sup>

In the public discussions of the company’s hygienic practices, Marks and Spencer was able to call upon established concepts and standards of cleanliness which would have been familiar to many of their adult customers. In announcing their ‘revolutionary hygienic code’ and extolling the virtues of their new hygienic innovations, the company was drawing upon the heritage and familiarity of the word hygiene whilst simultaneously chiming with the contemporary moment of modernity: applying contemporary connotations to a known and familiar concept. The language it was using was familiar and meaningful to their customers but the

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<sup>333</sup> A School of Tropical Medicine had been founded in Liverpool the previous year (1898) by the wealthy ship-owner Sir Alfred Lewis Jones. See [www.lstm.liverpool.ac.uk/about-lstm/history-of-lstm/](http://www.lstm.liverpool.ac.uk/about-lstm/history-of-lstm/) for further details.

<sup>334</sup> It is also interesting to note that the word ‘hygiene’ appears in a recognizable form in almost every European language. Thus, hygiene was a concept which translated its basic meaning across the western world and was able to be understood across national and linguistic borders.



means by which the company was engaging with the concept of hygiene could only be achieved through the use of modern, cutting-edge hygienic practices.

The timing of Marks and Spencer's work on hygienic practices in food retailing was therefore highly important. The company was able to capitalise on a powerful moment of modernity taking place in Britain after the Second World War, as the democratic middle-brow culture identified by LeMahieu took on more progressive, future oriented and technological dimensions. This was most clearly exemplified by the Festival of Britain in 1951. The festival was indicative of a cultural mind-set which was marked by an optimistic embrace of modernity and looked to the future with excitement. Organised by the Labour government, which had won by a landslide in 1945, over 8.5 million people visited the London South Bank exhibition and 2,000 towns, cities and villages organised a festival event. Research into the Festival of Britain has evolved in recent years from an emphasis on design aspects towards a more complex understanding of its social significance. Recent scholarship on this 'moment of modernity' in the 1950s has stressed that it is important 'not to accept too monolithic an understanding of "modernity"' but it may be generally perceived as constituting a post-war mind-set which embraced rationalist thought and championed functional design, particularly with regards to consumer goods.<sup>335</sup> Conekin has argued that the Festival of Britain projected a vision of a design-led future, 'brighter, better-planned, scientifically researched and more modern than the designs of the past or of the present'.<sup>336</sup> The festival itself was short-lived and traces

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<sup>335</sup> Peter Mandler, 'New Towns for Old: the Fate of the Town Centre' in Conekin, Mort and Waters (eds.), *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945 - 1964*, p. 227.

<sup>336</sup> Becky Conekin, "'Here is the Modern World Itself': the Festival of Britain's Representations of the Future' in *Moments of Modernity: Reconstructing Britain, 1945 - 1964*, p. 245.

of the accompanying exhibition were swiftly removed. However brief, this was a truly national moment of modernity which seemed to promise that the ‘fair shares’ of wartime austerity would evolve into higher standards of living for all members of British society. As well as the main exhibition in London, the BBC aired 2700 related broadcasts.<sup>337</sup> *Pathé* newsreels show footage of the HMS *Campania*, an aircraft carrier procured by festival organisers, which took ‘something of this exhibition to the ports of Britain’.<sup>338</sup> Conekin has argued that:

The Festival of Britain set the broad parameters of a social democratic agenda for a new and modern Britain. The expertise of architects, industrial designers, scientists and town planners was enlisted in this government project to construct representations of the nation’s past and future. As well as acting as a “tonic to the nation”, the Festival’s stated intention was to project “the belief that Britain will have contributions to make in the future”. These projections stressed progress and modernity, with science and planning evoked as answers to the question of *how* to build a better Britain. Everything from living conditions to “culture” and from industrial design to farm management was henceforward to be different, especially for those whose limited incomes had restricted their life experiences.<sup>339</sup>

The official book which accompanied the South Bank exhibition reflects Conekin’s description of the broad range of ideas on display, with zones such as the ‘dome of

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<sup>337</sup> Conekin, ““Here is the Modern World Itself”: the Festival of Britain’s Representations of the Future”, p. 228.

<sup>338</sup> *Pathé*, ‘All Set for Festival’ newsreel (May, 1951) [accessed online at [www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=33317](http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=33317) on 24<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

<sup>339</sup> Becky E. Conekin, *The autobiography of a nation’: The 1951 Festival of Britain* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003) p. 4.

discovery’ showcasing commonwealth agriculture and a ‘polar theatre’.<sup>340</sup> In the homes and gardens pavilion there was an area dedicated to modern kitchens, designed by Clive Latimer, Nigel Walter and F. L. Marcus. The exhibition guide explained:

More and more, in the past two decades, the housewife has been finding herself relegated to what, in the days when there were servants galore, used to be called “service quarters”. Designers have therefore been aiming to bring her back to where she belongs – into the social life of the house – without interrupting her work in the kitchen... The cooking department itself is laid out so that anything needed is close at hand. It must, of course, be easily cleaned; but the designer has had to ensure that, at the same time, the effect is pleasant enough for one to be able to sit and eat in the room as well as cook in it.<sup>341</sup>

This serves not only to give further context to the conceptualisation of customers as housewives, as was discussed in chapter 1, but also to explain the social and cultural outlook of the early 1950s from a domestic design perspective. The kitchens of the future were to be reorganised as the heart of the home with cleanliness and convenience as priorities of their design. This emphasis on the ability to maintain hygienic standards in the home was directly reflected in the work of Marks and Spencer and, as will be seen in chapters 5 and 6, convenience was to emerge later in the century as a defining characteristic of the company’s food retail strategy. The striking and modern designs which typified the Festival of Britain were also to be found in the Ideal Home Exhibitions during the 1950s. These exhibitions, which

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<sup>340</sup> Ian Cox, *The South Bank Exhibition: a Guide to the Story it Tells* (London: HMSO, 1951).

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71.

were sponsored by the *Daily Mail*, began in 1908 and have continued to the present day. They provided the opportunity for designers, retailers and manufacturers to display the latest innovations and use of cutting-edge technologies in interior design, home furnishings and gadgets. Newsreels showcasing the Ideal Home Exhibitions during the 1950s gave prominence to labour-saving devices and designs for the kitchen, which promised to take away the drudgery of domestic life for reluctant housewives. Efficiency was the defining word of the decade's exhibitions.<sup>342</sup> This was reflected in the introduction for the 1953 edition of Marks and Spencer's 'Hygienic Food Handling' manual, where 'cleanliness in catering is a measure of efficiency' was taken as a company motto. The modernity and convenience of the designs showcased both at the Festival of Britain and the Ideal Home Exhibitions were also beginning to be reflected in the company's stores. In the chairman's review of 1953, it was explained that:

Modernisation means a radical conversion which has given many of our stores a new look and a new character more in keeping with the specialised goods we are selling. We have spent much on equipment and on specially designed display fixtures and counters. We have introduced modern decorative and lighting schemes, for we seek to create a worthy setting for our goods and to give to our customers the convenience of shopping in attractive surroundings.<sup>343</sup>

Marks and Spencer was being influenced by this moment of modernity in Britain and, through its hygienic practices, helping to shape the future of food consumption in Britain. Ideas of hygiene and convenience were becoming synonymous and both were situated in the optimistic outlook of post-war British society.

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<sup>342</sup> *Ideal Home Exhibition* newsreel (March 1959) [accessed online at [www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=35669](http://www.britishpathe.com/record.php?id=35669) on 8<sup>th</sup> June 2011].

<sup>343</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1953, p.5.

Hygiene was the first of a series of retailing innovations with a definite strategic focus which was to shape the experiences of both Marks and Spencer and British food consumers. The company's policy on hygienic practices was created within the complex context of post-war rationing and the burgeoning prosperity of peacetime. It was successful in establishing a role for itself as being a representative of consumer interests, both in terms of food safety and quality. Indeed, through its work in hygiene the company was able to position itself at the forefront of retailing innovations. Its work on best before dates, which it had implemented twenty seven years before British government legislation made them mandatory, is testament to this and illustrative of the importance Marks and Spencer placed on building a relationship of trust with its customers.

Hygiene was a continuous principle of the company's food retailing strategy in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, it was not unique in this regard and their experience was not only mirrored by the operations of supermarkets such as Sainsbury, but was also preceded in the nineteenth century by the work of the co-operative movement on food adulteration. The setting of high hygienic standards was a central facet of Marks and Spencer's relationship with suppliers and it was therefore able to take part in constructing the concepts of hygiene and cleanliness in British society through their engagement with overseas food producers. The high standards the company set in the immediate post-war period later served to facilitate the use of new techniques and methods of food transportation and retail. It was successful in building upon pre-existing scientific research and understandings of dirt and disease and a contemporary mind-set of modernity and progress. This was

reflected in its hygienic practices and also served to influence the design of the company's stores. The study of hygiene also highlights the usefulness of approaching the social history of food along national lines and the emergence of convenience as a major facet of the social history of food in Britain in the twentieth century.

When considering the relationship between retailers and consumers, this chapter shows the value of a focussed study of one food retailer and highlights the role that Marks and Spencer have played in shaping the history food consumption in Britain. Whilst hygiene itself is a socially constructed concept, its permanence in the operations of the company throughout the twentieth century indicates that this was a significant area of continuity in both retailing strategies and consumer behaviours. Hygiene was the first major strategic retailing innovation in the post-war period. It was an issue upon which Marks and Spencer was able build with its subsequent retailing strategies in order to carve out a role as a retailer of safe, quality food products which offered customers choice, value for money and, increasingly, convenience.

## Chapter 5 - Introducing new tastes

This chapter explores the introduction of new tastes to the British diet during the period 1950 - 1980, using the business archives of Marks and Spencer in order to advance our understanding of the role of British food retailers in responding to, and helping to shape, the consumer behaviour of their customers. The key ways in which the British diet changed over the course of the twentieth century will be considered, which invites an examination of what the 'British' diet was, and whether it is right or even useful to think of historical food consumption and retailing along national lines. Perhaps the most striking development, and one which chimes with the idea of 'Britishness', was the introduction and subsequent assimilation of 'exotic' and 'foreign' foods and dishes. For many people spaghetti bolognese, chicken tikka masala and stir fried rice all call easily to mind when considering significant food changes in twentieth-century British popular culture. Along this line of enquiry, it is possible to understand the concept of 'Britishness' as being conceptualised in relation to its 'exotic other': a sort of food orientalism by which a definition of 'otherness' served to define the selves of British consumers through their dietary choices.<sup>344</sup> Within this discussion, consideration must be given to the role of British food retailers, and Marks and Spencer in particular, and their role in introducing and assimilating these 'new' tastes. Ultimately, it will be argued that the 'British' diet in the twentieth century was defined by three values: affordability, variety and convenience and the 'exotic' was only significant as a vehicle through which to increase the choice of food products offered to consumers.

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<sup>344</sup> Edward Saïd, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 2003) [first published 1977] p. 2.

Whilst Marks and Spencer was selling 'exotic' fruits and 'ethnic' recipe dishes, there are no sources within their business archive to suggest that executives or employees of the food department were actively discussing their role in the process of constructing the cultural meanings of these products. Nor was the company conducting consumer or social research into the particular eating patterns of its customers. There are no sources which suggest that Marks and Spencer was examining waves of immigration and adjusting its retailing practices to account for increasing exposure to 'foreign' cuisines through restaurants or celebrity chefs and the impact these cultural factors were having on the behaviour and demands of its customers. This serves to highlight a fundamental truth of historical research: sometimes, what is absent from an archive is just as illuminating for historians as the sources that it contains. In this instance, the absence of sources debating the 'exotic' nature of the company's products, its role in communicating this to consumers, or consideration of immigration, foreign travel, restaurants, celebrity chefs and the impact this was having on the behaviour of its customers, would seem to indicate that 'exotic' food products were not a primary concern for Marks and Spencer. Rather, they served as vehicles for the application of technological innovations in food retail, processing and distribution. The history of food retailing in twentieth-century Britain is, therefore, primarily a history of technology and its implementation rather than one of cultural change. Similarly, the history of food consumption and consumer behaviour in the twentieth century is marked more by the continuity of value for money and increased choice as drivers of consumer demand, than any appetite for 'exotic' food products *per se*.



The material in the Marks and Spencer company archive is particularly interesting for these purposes, in part due to the organisation's somewhat unusual position on the British high street as a food retailer with a great deal of experience in textiles and clothing, as discussed in chapter 3 during the examination of the growth of multiple food retailers. In 1961, Simon Marks surmised:

In recent years we have devoted much time and thought to applying to the food side of our business the same fundamental approach which we have applied in the field of textiles and I am glad to say that this policy has shown encouraging results.<sup>345</sup>

Whilst relatively new on the agenda as a topic for historical research, the history of food, particularly 'exotic' and 'ethnic' foods, in twentieth-century Britain has been explored by sociologists, including Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott, Anneke H. van Otterloo and Allison James.<sup>346</sup> This topic has also been the subject of historical research by Panikos Panayi.<sup>347</sup> In the field of social geography, researchers such as May and Jackson have considered the meanings of 'exotic' and 'national' food consumption and the impact these issues have on the everyday lives of consumers.<sup>348</sup>

There is a level of consensus within existing scholarship about the influential role that colonialism and Britain's imperial past have historically had on the food consumption patterns of British citizens. The highly influential work of Braudel, one of the leaders of the French Annales School, in his research on *Civilization and*

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<sup>345</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 9<sup>th</sup> June 1961, p. 3.

<sup>346</sup> Stephen Mennell, Anne Murcott and Anneke H. van Otterloo, *The Sociology of Food: Eating, diet and culture* (London: Sage, 1993); Allison James, 'How British is British food?' in Pat Caplan (ed.), *Food, Health and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>347</sup> Panikos Panayi, *Spicing up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

<sup>348</sup> Jon May, "'A Little Taste of Something More Exotic': The Imaginative Geographies of Everyday Life", *Geography*, vol. 80, no. 1 (January, 1996) pp. 57 - 64; Peter Jackson, 'Local consumption cultures in a globalizing world', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 29, no. 2 (June, 2004) pp. 165 -178.

*Capitalism*, served to highlight the myriad ways in which the trade and importation of foodstuffs was intrinsic to the industrialising processes of Western European nations in the early modern period. Braudel used the term ‘exotic’ in his seminal text without clarifying his definition and relying instead on an unspoken understanding on the part of the reader with regards to cultural connotations and geographical origins of the ‘exotic stimulants’ and ‘exotic woods’, whose trade journeys he was describing.<sup>349</sup> May gave greater consideration to his working definition of the ‘exotic’, drawing upon Saïd’s concept of Orientalism and the Greek etymological root of the word *exo*, meaning ‘outside’.<sup>350</sup> May extended this to encapsulate a Eurocentric definition, beginning in the sixteenth century, of ‘exotic’ as meaning ‘that which is outside of Europe’.<sup>351</sup> Within a specific British context, Walvin’s 1997 research on taste and the British empire serves as a useful foundation for understanding the continuity of consumption patterns established in the long eighteenth century. Walvin examined the importation and assimilation of ‘tropical staples’ such as tea, coffee and chocolate, ultimately arguing that not only did these ‘exotic’ products, a result of Britain’s imperial endeavours, play a key role in shaping British social habits but that the popularity and assimilation of these products into the ‘British diet’ served in turn to spur more aggressive and acquisitive foreign policy decisions in order to guarantee their continued supply.<sup>352</sup> Walvin went so far as to argue that into the nineteenth century, these ‘exotic’ products ‘even helped to define the very nature of Britishness itself’.<sup>353</sup> This is significant within the context of this chapter because it draws attention to the idea that it is continuity,

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<sup>349</sup> Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: 15<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Vol I: The Structure of Everyday Life* (London: Collins, 1981) pages 227, 250, 303 & 310.

<sup>350</sup> May, ‘A Little Taste of Something More Exotic’, p. 57.

<sup>351</sup> May, p. 57.

<sup>352</sup> James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Products and British Taste, 1660 - 1800* (London: Macmillan, 1997) p. x.

<sup>353</sup> Walvin, *Fruits of Empire*, p. 193.

rather than change, which is the most notable characteristic of British food consumption patterns in the modern period.

To return to Saïd's Orientalist paradigm, the process of defining what is 'exotic' and 'Other' goes hand in hand with a subsequent consideration of the 'self'. In this instance, the idea of 'Britishness' is defined by demarking certain foodstuffs and consumer behaviours as 'not British'. Historians of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century British food history have had a tendency to presuppose the legitimacy of national diets and 'British food' choices as a means of understanding consumer behaviours without giving satisfactory consideration to whether understanding food and its consumption along national lines is a useful, or even relevant, mode of enquiry.<sup>354</sup> If the 'exotic Other' is luxurious, expensive, difficult to obtain, rare, unfamiliar and time consuming to prepare, then the 'British self' is therefore the opposite: commonplace, affordable, easy to procure, familiar and convenient. The process of assimilating 'exotic' foods into the 'British' diet is certainly a process of increasing familiarity, and often it is understood wholly in these terms. However, and arguably more importantly, it is also a process of increasing affordability and convenience. As 'exotic' and luxury products become increasingly easy to obtain and consume, and decrease in price, they undergo a process of assimilation into the British 'self' and lose their 'Otherness'.

Whilst Panayi argued that the proliferation of ethnic cookbooks in the twentieth century 'points to the increasingly accepted idea that foods have nationalities or

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<sup>354</sup> See Christopher Driver, *The British at table, 1940 - 1980* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1983); Drummond and Wilbraham, *The Englishman's food*; Kate Colquhoun, *Taste: The Story of Britain through its Cooking* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007).

ethnicities',<sup>355</sup> the sociologist Allison James, using representations of food in popular press sources from the 1990s, asserted the contrasting opinion that:

Cuisines are not limited by geography or nationhood. Each national cuisine bears the traces of trade, travel and, increasingly, of technology, so that food could more correctly be said to be constitutive of global rather than local cultures.<sup>356</sup>

James further expanded upon this idea and, drawing upon the work of sociologist Stephen Mennell, argued that it is the motivation to save both time and money which most strongly defined the food consumption habits of British consumers in the twentieth century.<sup>357</sup> It is worth noting that Mennell's conclusions were also drawn from an examination of popular press sources, notably the magazines *Good Housekeeping* and *Woman's Own*.<sup>358</sup> John Benson also touched briefly on this issue in his 1994 work *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880 - 1980*. Whilst not explicitly defining national characteristics of dietary choices, in his discussion of the growth of the importance of female consumers for producers, retailers and advertisers from the late-nineteenth century onward, Benson argued that 'food manufacturers and processors sought to appeal to housewives by emphasising the cost, quality, and later the convenience of their products'.<sup>359</sup> Drawing primarily on newspapers' advertising columns for products such as Hoover vacuum cleaners and Quaker Oats, Benson did not consider the central role played by ever increasing variety as a hallmark of the British diet, despite his examination of wide range of product advertisements. He did, however, discuss the development of convenience as

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<sup>355</sup> Panayi, *Spicing up Britain*, p. 14.

<sup>356</sup> James, 'How British is British food?', p. 73.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>358</sup> Stephen Mennell, *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985) pp. 260 - 261.

<sup>359</sup> Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain*, p. 47.

a defining characteristic of the way products were marketed during the twentieth century, focussing on a 1938 Hoover advertisement which stressed the time and labour saving advantages of the device.<sup>360</sup> Unlike Mennell and James, Benson alluded to the manner in which advertisements emphasised the quality of food products in order to appeal to female consumers. This was certainly an element of the decision making process of British consumers which was considered to be of great importance at Marks and Spencer. Indeed, the viewpoints of James, Mennell and Benson find significant support in the primary material held in the Marks and Spencer company archive. Thus, rather than any concepts of 'Britishness' and food as being concerned primarily with particular ingredients or particular styles and methods of cooking, it is the values of variety, affordability and convenience which are of primary importance and which have served as the defining features of the 'British' diet in the course of the twentieth century. Moreover, Marks and Spencer used notions of the quality of its food products as a way of distinguishing itself from competitors and appearing to offer something extra to British consumers.

It will be argued here that whilst the imperial history of Britain and its trade and engagement with its colonies in the modern period is of undoubted importance within the social history of food in Britain throughout the twentieth century, the key to understanding the mindset of British consumers in the period 1950 - 1980, is firmly rooted in the experience, both first- and second-hand, of wartime austerity. During the Second World War and post-war rationing, the foodstuffs available to British citizens at home were routinely commented upon in diaries and memoirs of the period as being marked by monotony and a lack of choice. Nella Last gained

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

recognition for writing about her experiences as a wartime housewife in Barrow-in-Furness for the Mass Observation archive. In her diaries of the post-war years of rationing, Last recalled remarking to her son Cliff, ‘Ah, for the days of mixed grills and good ham and fish, and lots of fruit of every kind’.<sup>361</sup> The lack of variety and choice in food consumption during wartime and the immediate post-war period, with diets characterised by what Mackay has termed ‘dull sufficiency’, is fundamental to an understanding of the subsequent behaviours and consumption patterns of newly affluent post-war consumers.<sup>362</sup> Marks and Spencer’s success in responding to this change in the demands of newly affluent consumers was critiqued in an article in the *Guardian* in 1984. The article assessed contemporary perceptions of food processing in the form of canning and the then relatively new chilled ready meals sector:

the canners are very well aware that their products have an old fashioned image. More particularly, the margin possible on canned foods tend to be lower than the margins available in well-presented fresh foods. Contrast the experience of the extraordinarily successful Marks and Spencer in foods with the experience, say, of the Co-op.<sup>363</sup>

Once again, the co-operative societies were being used as Marks and Spencer’s retailing ‘other’: the differences in their retail practices in the twentieth century being used here as shorthand for the application of technological innovations.

The *Chairman’s Reviews* of Marks and Spencer clearly pointed to the end of food

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<sup>361</sup> Nella Last, *Nella Last’s Peace: The post-war diaries of Housewife*, 49 (London: Profile, 2008) p. 54.

<sup>362</sup> Mackay, *Half the Battle*, p. 111.

<sup>363</sup> ‘A canny look at the future - will the home cooking tide surge past the food men?’, *Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> March 1984.

rationing in 1954 as a turning point for British food and retail history. In 1963 Israel Sieff explained:

A significant change took place in 1954. After 14 years of austerity, which included the war years, all Government controls came to an end. Clothing coupons, food ration cards, and licences for building had all been swept away. Gone were the restrictions and limitations which had been imposed on the economy for so long. We were free, at long last, to use our initiative and to draw up systematic plans for the development of the business. The development of "St. Michael" garments and foodstuffs became priorities and an extensive building and modernization programme could be carried out in earnest.<sup>364</sup>

The significance of 1954 in the social history of food consumption and retailing in Britain was identified at the time by the chairman Simon Marks. Speaking in 1955 of Marks and Spencer's experience over the previous year and reflecting upon the changes which were occurring in British society, Marks proclaimed that:

With full employment, higher wages, and rising productivity, the purchasing power of the community is steadily increasing. The standard of life of the great majority of our people has been rising appreciably. Goods, materials and foodstuffs are now available to the public in great profusion and variety. The nation has, indeed, come a long way since the period of shortages and rationing, less than three years ago.<sup>365</sup>

The experience of the restrictions and limitations under rationing spoken of by Marks was arguably the defining feature of both food consumption and food retailing in the second half of the twentieth century. After living and working with such limited choices and such a restricted range of goods, both consumers and retailers

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<sup>364</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1963, p. 2.

<sup>365</sup> 'Marks and Spencer Limited', *The Times*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1955, p. 15.

were ‘free, at long last’ to exercise the freedom to eat and innovate as they saw fit. The key issue in which the interests of food retailers and their customers overlapped was in the development of a wider range of goods. This satisfied consumer demands for increased choice and the desire of retailers to innovate and add value to their products with the use of ever more sophisticated technologies. ‘Exotic’ and ‘ethnic’ products thus became vehicles for retailing innovations. The desire on the part of consumers was for greater choice and a wider range of goods, rather than a specific demand for ‘exotic’ goods *per se*. Similarly, Marks and Spencer’s food development work focussed on the values of affordability, variety of choice and quality, rather than specific ideas of ethnicity, nationality and immigration.

The tone for the relationship between the company’s retailing strategies and the desires and behaviours of their customers was set out in the 1953 chairman’s statement by Simon Marks:

In our Food Section we have continued to develop specialised lines of quality and value ... Important ingredients such as fats and sugar are now more freely available. Our suppliers will be able to progressively utilise these basic raw materials at reasonable prices instead of expensive - and not always satisfactory - substitutes which have had to be used hitherto. In co-operation with our friends, we are now engaged in improving our values and in bringing down the selling prices of many items for which there is a wide demand.<sup>366</sup>

Though still under the restrictions of wartime austerity measures in 1953, with bacon and meat not off the ration until July 1954, the company can be seen to have

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<sup>366</sup> *Chairman’s Reviews*, 11<sup>th</sup> June 1953, p. 4.



focussed its attention and resources on making food products more affordable for its customers. This emphasis on ‘quality and value’, alongside increased breadth of choice, was to remain a cornerstone of the company’s approach to food retailing as the century progressed.

The 1960s was the decade in which ideas of ‘Britishness’ in food consumption as being most strongly associated with ideas of affordability, accessibility and choice really came to the fore in the retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer. Simon Marks’ speech to shareholders during 1962 annual meeting articulated the company’s perception of consumer behaviour as being driven by choice and highlighted the role of suppliers in meeting this demand for variety:

In order to satisfy the growing requirements of our customers we are widening the range of our food products ... our friends have been able to develop with confidence because of the increasing market Marks and Spencer stores offer for fine quality foods at reasonable prices.<sup>367</sup>

The 1963 speech, delivered by Israel Sieff, discussed the success with which this policy of diversifying their product offering had met, announcing that customers ‘have welcomed the wider range of “St. Michael” goods which we are now offering’.<sup>368</sup> Once again, ‘exotic’ ingredients were not referred to explicitly and were instead seen as part of a wider process of broadening the breadth of food products sold by the company. As the decade progressed, Marks and Spencer remained steadfast to the key values of affordability and increased choice, alongside notions of quality:

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<sup>367</sup> *Chairman’s Reviews*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1962, p. 3.

<sup>368</sup> *Chairman’s Reviews*, 14<sup>th</sup> June 1963, p. 3.

Our food sales reached £45,000,000, an increase of £6,000,000 on the previous year. In the last five years our sales have doubled, despite the intense competition in the food trade. This striking rate of expansion is due to the high reputation our foods have earned for their quality, freshness and value. Our customers appreciate the attractive displays and clean presentation and buy, secure in the knowledge that the brand name 'St. Michael' is a guarantee of purity and freshness.<sup>369</sup>

This statement from 1964 attributed the company's success in food retail directly to their focus on the values central to concepts of 'Britishness', notably of value and affordability, and those which allow them to most successfully apply technological innovation, in establishing ever greater levels of quality and freshness. At the decade's close, the company was posting record profits in their food sales and it viewed the expanding choice offered to customers in its stores as directly responsible for this success: 'Our food sales this year have reached £86,840,000 as compared with £76,400,000 last year and have trebled since 1960. Their growth is based on a specialised but increasing range of high quality foods which are produced to our standards and specifications.'<sup>370</sup> The importance of increased variety and quality was given precedence over any concept of the 'exotic'.

The 1970s saw a very significant change in the way that Marks and Spencer conceived of the desires of their customers. Whilst concepts of affordability and choice remained central to their understanding of the motivations of British consumers, from the mid-1970s the importance of convenience as a defining feature of the 'British' diet began to amplify in significance. In terms of consumer history,

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<sup>369</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1964, p. 2.

<sup>370</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1969, p. 8.

this shift in consumer desires was fuelled by a complex confluence of socio-cultural and economic factors. This will be considered in further depth in chapter 6, but comprised of a rise in disposable household income, increasing female participation in the workforce, ownership of domestic technologies, decreasing household size and changing constructs of time. Speaking at the annual meeting in 1973, the chairman Marcus Sieff continued to underline the desire of customers to choose from a wide range of food products:

Our food sales this year reached £144,951,000 compared with £126,651,000 last year; they increased by 9 ½ per cent per annum during the first half of the financial year and by 19 per cent per annum in the second. There is no doubt that our wider range of high quality foodstuffs, especially of cold counter items, has contributed to this.<sup>371</sup>

By continuing to expand upon the range and variety of food products sold in Marks and Spencer stores, the company was able to capitalise on the increasing affluence of its customers during the 1970s and to satisfy the patterns of consumer behaviour rooted in wartime austerity, which generated a seemingly insatiable demand for ever greater choice in the second half of the twentieth century. In 1974 attention was again given to the primacy of affordability as a key feature of British consumer behaviour, as Marcus Sieff commented: ‘We are very concerned about the large and continuing increases in the price of raw materials which have forced our manufacturers to charge more for the foods we buy. We have substantially reduced our margins on a number of major items to limit price increases.’<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>371</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1973, p. 9.

<sup>372</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1974, p. 10.

The speeches given by Marks and Spencer chairmen during the annual general meetings afford some very interesting insights into the changes that were taking place after 1975 in the way that people consumed food. The social, cultural and economic factors influencing these changes will be discussed in detail in chapter 6 as part of a case study of the creation of the chilled ready meals sector at the end of the 1970s. The overriding issue which began to grow in significance during this period was a demand for convenience. This is arguably the final defining feature of the 'British' diet in the period 1950 - 1980. In the 1976 chairman's review, the work of the company in responding to this consumer demand for increasingly convenient products was described, alongside the continued importance of quality, affordability, and increased choice:

Our sales of "St. Michael" foods in the United Kingdom have grown by £47,323,000 to £255,706,000. Our customers increasingly appreciate the high quality standards and good values we offer. We are making much progress in developing our range of cooked meats, roast poultry and salads.<sup>373</sup>

The area of convenience food was identified by the company as a growing market segment to which it could successfully apply its technological approach and increase profit margins. This particular source serves to highlight the ways in which Marks and Spencer was adapting its retailing practices in order to satisfy what Mennell and James have argued were the defining characteristics of the demands of British food consumers in the twentieth century: the desire to save both money and time. At the end of the decade, it is the continuity of the language used to describe the food products sold by Marks and Spencer which is most striking. As in 1953, the

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<sup>373</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1976, p. 11.

emphasis in 1977 was firmly on value and quality, with the expansion of consumer choice also highly important for the company:

Our sales of “St. Michael” foods in the United Kingdom have grown by £55,771,000 to £311,477,000. We are adding to our range lines for which there is today a large and increasing demand. Our growth is due to our maintaining high quality and food value and our system of controlled temperature transport and storage with strict attention to keeping life, hygiene and freshness, which were particularly relevant during last year’s very hot summer.<sup>374</sup>

The company’s investment in cold chain technologies, as discussed in this source, was an important factor in their ability to provide increasingly convenient food products for consumers. Chapter 6 of this thesis discusses the development of cold chain technology at Marks and Spencer in greater detail, but it is important to note that this was one of the most significant developments in the history of food retail and consumption in the twentieth century. The application of cold chain technologies at Marks and Spencer significantly increased the accessibility and convenience of their offering. It also raised the apparent contradiction, when considered in terms of the debate set forth by Mennell, of increasing time savings at the expense of affordability. The development of consumer preferences which increasingly catered to ‘cash-rich, time-poor’ consumers who placed a premium on convenience will also be discussed in chapter 6 of this research, and will draw upon the research into time-using and time-saving technologies as researched by Bowden and Offer.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>374</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1977, p. 11.

<sup>375</sup> Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, ‘Household appliances and the use of time: the United States and Britain since the 1920s’, *Economic History Review*, vol. 47, no. 4 (November, 1994) pp. 725 - 748.

The final chairman's review of the 1970s announced that, 'in foods, we continue our policy of upgrading the quality and improving the taste. There is a ready acceptance of high quality appetising foods where prices still represent good values.'<sup>376</sup> This continued emphasis of affordability and value was again seen in the 1980 report, where Marcus Sieff announced a new campaign for lower prices:

In September we lowered prices of a number of major items of "St. Michael" clothing and foods and held back price increases across a wide range of lines. We shared the cost with our manufacturers. Our quality standards were maintained. This new Lower Prices and Better Value campaign increased sales and helped our manufacturers to maintain reasonable levels of production.<sup>377</sup>

Thus, ideas of affordability, wider choice and quality were consistently prioritised by Marks and Spencer in its food retailing between 1950 and 1980. From the mid-1970s, the company also made convenience a concern of primary importance. At no point did the chairmen's reviews discuss the introduction of 'exotic' or 'ethnic' ingredients or food products. Neither did they assess the role of immigration, foreign travel or celebrity cooks and the impact of these factors in the 'British' diet. This analysis of the Marks and Spencer chairmen's reviews thus serves to give further weight to Mennell and James's arguments. The 'British' diet in the twentieth century was primarily driven by consumer demands for savings in both time and money, rather than with any concepts of national cuisine, indigenous ingredients, or a particular style and method of cooking. Mennell and James's hypotheses were drawn from their qualitative analysis of the women's magazines *Woman's Own* and *Good Housekeeping* and popular press sources including *Radio Times* and food writers, respectively. This examination of sources from the Marks and Spencer company

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<sup>376</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1979, p. 7.

<sup>377</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1980, p. 6.

archives provides a useful counterpoint to the social commentary and public-facing press material that has previously been examined. It adds a new dimension to this debate by providing evidence of how the 'British' diet was conceived of by a food retailer and pinpoints the shift towards convenience as a key motivating force in the behaviour of consumers from the 1970s.

It was in the development of fruit that Marks and Spencer was able to bring its technological approach to food retailing to bear most successfully, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s. Fruit is also a very interesting section of the food market to explore when considering ideas of the 'exotic' and the history of fruit retailing at the company provides some particularly interesting insights into the ways in which the British diet changed second half of the twentieth century. It will be argued here that the 'exotic' is almost incidental when considering the history of fruit consumption in Britain. Rather, it was increased variety at affordable prices which were of greatest significance to British consumers. The study of 'exotic' fruit is again more a history of affordability and convenience than of cultural or social issues such as immigration. As 'exotic' fruits became cheaper and more easily accessible, they were assimilated into the British diet and lost their 'Otherness'. Convenience in fruit consumption takes on a particular dimension with these time-limited food products, becoming predominantly concerned with year-round accessibility in their whole form, as well as more traditional ideas of convenience, such as pre-prepared products which utilised increasingly sophisticated levels of food processing.

In a Marks and Spencer checking list from December 1984, a document which provided a sales snapshot of items sold in their stores across the UK, the products listed as ‘exotic’ fruit include sharon fruit from Israel, kiwi fruit from New Zealand, and mangoes from Brazil.<sup>378</sup> The sales of the fruits classed as ‘exotic’ represented a very small percentage of the company’s total fruit sales. However, further inspection of this document reveals that all the fruits sold by the company at this time were from producers outside Britain, with the exception of English Cox and Golden Delicious apples. When compared to the only other complete checking list held in the Marks and Spencer company archive, from April 1939, this represents a significant change in the sourcing, buying and labelling policy of the organisation. In 1939, the only fruit to be given a specific ‘non-British’ place of origin in labelling is the ‘African Pineapple’.<sup>379</sup> The seasonal nature of fruit supply chains is an important factor to consider in the analysis of these checking lists. In 1984 the checking list detailed products being sold in stores during December, out of season for British soft fruits such as strawberries and raspberries, whereas the 1939 checking list is from April. Thus, a further complexity is added to our understanding of the changing behaviours and expectations of British consumers in the twentieth century as here it is evident that Marks and Spencer was facilitating an ‘all the year round’ availability of fruits by the mid-1980s and was attempting to remove the natural seasonality of food products by importing from around the globe outside of the indigenous growing season. Between the start of the Second World War and the mid-1980s, fruit consumption and retailing in Britain had undergone a significant shift from relatively short, localised networks of distribution, retail and consumption to increasingly complex and global fruit supply chains. However, the introduction of new tastes and

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<sup>378</sup> MSCA, E13/3/10 and E13/3/21, Checking Lists, 1984 Checking List, F.16 Produce.

<sup>379</sup> MSCA, E13/1/21/6, Checking Lists, 1939 Checking List, Fruit.



products grown abroad had not gone hand-in-hand with an Orientalist approach to the 'exotic'. Instead, these products had been assimilated into the 'British' diet by means of the consistency of their availability, decrease in price and, arguably, increase in quality.

Certainly, the sale and consumption of 'exotic' fruit was not a twentieth-century phenomenon. Walvin has argued that the long eighteenth century, from 1660 - 1800, was the key period for the introduction of 'exotic commodities' to Britain, whereas Yves Péhaut pointed to the rapid development of transportation in the nineteenth century and parallel advances in agronomy as having 'paved the way for a considerable expansion of the area from which Europe could draw fresh fruits and vegetables'.<sup>380</sup> Péhaut recognised that the process of making 'exotic' fruit more accessible and convenient was essential to their assimilation into the British diet, explaining: 'An exotic fruit at first, today the banana has become commonplace throughout the temperate zone, as common as apples or citrus fruits, no doubt because it can be purchased year round.'<sup>381</sup> The history of the English banana importing company Fyffes describes the process by which bananas were introduced to the mass-market, using first the Gros Michel and later the Giant Cavendish strains as stock. Detailing the agricultural and technological developments that facilitated importation, the biography suggests that a key reason as to why bananas went from being a 'rather unusual tropical fruit' to 'an ordinary part of our diet' was the success

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<sup>380</sup> Walvin, p. ix; Yves Péhaut, 'The Invasion of Foreign Foods' in Jean-Louis Flandrin and Massimo Montanari (eds.), *Food: a Culinary History from Antiquity to the Present* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999) p. 463.

<sup>381</sup> Péhaut, 'The Invasion of Foreign Foods', p. 466.

of Fyffe's 1920s sales campaign.<sup>382</sup> Péhaut argued that was necessary for 'exotic' fruits to become more affordable in order gain mass consumption and lose their 'exotic' status. With regard to fresh pineapples, Péhaut explained that 'the pineapple was still confined largely to the upper classes because of its high cost'.<sup>383</sup> However, in this consideration of the 'exotic Other' in fruit, the final step is not taken to consider the 'British self' (or in this case 'European') and the definition of the 'British' diet as being primarily motivated by affordability, greater choice and convenience. Instead, Péhaut speculated that the popularity of these fruits is due to 'the fact that many Europeans and Americans have visited the tropics and developed a fondness for the bountiful gifts of nature found there'.<sup>384</sup> Péhaut gave no references to primary or secondary material to verify this viewpoint and instead draws tentative conclusions about both the impact of both foreign travel and immigration, neglecting any exploration of the fundamental features of 'national diets' and the validity of this line of inquiry.

Within the primary material held in the Marks and Spencer company archive, the significance of the defining features of the British diet feature frequently in discussions of the company's work in fruit retailing, with a particular emphasis placed upon improving quality. In the period in question, the specific desire on the part of consumers for 'exotic' fruit is not discussed, neither are factors such as increased foreign travel or immigration. Instead, food development work in fruit is spoken of in terms of broadening the choice available to consumers, establishing stable, year-round availability, lowering price and increasing quality. The chairman's

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<sup>382</sup> Patrick Beaver, *Yes! We have some: The story of Fyffes* (Stevenage: Publications for Companies, 1976) pp. 4 - 8.

<sup>383</sup> Péhaut, p. 467.

<sup>384</sup> Péhaut, p. 469.

reviews are striking for their continuity, rather than change, over the 1960s and 1970s. Simon Marks's review in 1960 clearly set out the key factors which were to steer the company's work and decision-making over the next decades and it was evident that focussing on improving the quality and value of their products through the application of technological innovations was resulting in increased food sales:

I am pleased to say that there has been a progressive growth in the sales of our Food Division which last year reached £24,500,000. We continue to concentrate mainly on speciality bakery products and selected and graded fruit, for it is in these fields that we are able to bring our technological approach to bear most effectively... St. Michael fruit is specially selected and graded at strategically sited growing and packing centres in this country and abroad. The large scale on which this is carried out enables us to sell high quality fruit at prices the public can afford to pay.<sup>385</sup>

This emphasis on technology, rather than any notions of the 'exotic', is particularly interesting as it suggests that 'exotic' fruits were simply a vehicle for the application of the company's technological approach to food retailing. Selling fruit 'at prices the public can afford to pay' was a key element Marks and Spencer's retailing strategy in the second half of the twentieth century, as it chimed with notions of 'Britishness' in consumer behaviours, as being primarily motivated by affordability.

In 1962, Simon Marks spoke of the company's application of technology in fruit selection and use of innovative fruit distribution strategies in order to guarantee quality in their fruit products:

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<sup>385</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 10<sup>th</sup> June 1960, p.3.

We have encouraged the development, both in this country and abroad, of strategically sited packaging stations at which 'St Michael' fruit is selected and graded. This represents a considerable step forward and enables us to apply principles of selection and grading which ensure that our fruit shall be of best quality.<sup>386</sup>

With fruit, improving quality through selecting and grading also helped to improve the availability of the products by preventing decay in transit of damaged or low quality products. The review of 1965 by Israel Sieff was particularly illuminating for a consideration of the importance of affordability and variety as defining features in the British diet:

Our technologists have worked closely with our forward-thinking suppliers, important raw material producers, leading food manufacturers and farmers, as well as research institutes, in their unceasing efforts to upgrade the quality and improve values. For example, in the difficult field of fruit and horticultural produce, we have persuaded some important growers and packers, not only in this country but also abroad, to upgrade their selection for us. The influence of our technologists on the growers has been, both for them and for us, extremely rewarding ... Our brand name, St Michael, carries with it an assurance of uniform good quality and is a guarantee of the accuracy of the description we give our goods. This idea is the very marrow of our thinking and planning. We and our suppliers, working together, have by more efficient methods of processing and distribution extended the variety of our goods. We have been able to meet the challenge of rising costs so as to enable us to minimise increases in price.<sup>387</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1962, p. 3.

<sup>387</sup> *Chairman's Reviews*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1965, p. 3.

Once again, the company's emphasis was on increasing the variety of the food products sold in their stores, ensuring affordability and driving up quality standards. Despite specifically discussing their work with growers and packers in other countries, Sieff did not seem to consider ideas bringing 'exotic' tastes to British consumers as being of primary importance. Instead, the focus was always on widening the variety of items: particularly those food products to which Marks and Spencer could apply their technological approach. The influence of the company's technologists went far beyond their impact on the growers with which it worked.

Indeed, it will be argued here that technology was central to the way that the company operated as a food retailer in the period 1950 - 1980. David Sieff offered the company's definition of this in the introduction to a 1981 presentation to Marks and Spencer's board, titled 'The Changing Role of Technology'. The purpose of this presentation, which was given by a number of food technologists, was to consider the current role of technology at the company and within the context of wider developments in food technology since the 1960s. Sieff explained that '[t]he role of Technology in Marks and Spencer is the application of knowledge to the development and production of our merchandise'.<sup>388</sup> He outlined the way in which the company conceived of their role within the food industry, and the place of technology in their retailing strategy: 'we are pioneers not inventors; we are responsible for setting and maintaining standards, innovating and sourcing'.<sup>389</sup> This would suggest that food technology within Marks and Spencer was primarily

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<sup>388</sup> MSCA, Q/Q5/36/4, Notes by our Marks & Spencer Staff on food, 'The Changing Role of Technology', presentation to the Board by Mr A. Griffiths, 20<sup>th</sup> October 1981, introduction by David Sieff, p. 1.

<sup>389</sup> 'The Changing Role of Technology', introduction by David Sieff, p.1.

concerned with product development and the application of the newest technologies, not technological invention and research.

Some evidence for this assertion can be found in the careful attention paid by the company's food development team to the findings of relevant research in academia and the wider industry. Marks and Spencer food technologists frequently engaged in research and published the results of their findings in peer reviewed food technology journals. Within the papers of Nathan Goldenberg there are multiple examples of detailed scientific research papers for particular areas in which the company was involving itself in food development. These include an article from the *European Journal of Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology* on marine fish spoilage, a paper on the chilling sensitivity of avocados from the *American Society for Horticultural Science*, and on the transportation of bananas in polyethylene bags from *Tropical Agriculture*.<sup>390</sup> Nathan Goldenberg frequently published the results of his research in academic and industry journals. Whilst it is not clear whether this constituted part of his job role in the food technology department, Goldenberg often drew upon his experience at Marks and Spencer and based his findings on the company's work in the food industry.<sup>391</sup> It must also be noted that the company invested a significant

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<sup>390</sup> MSCA, Q/Q5/13/15, Mira Barak and Shimon Ulitzur, 'Bacterial Bioluminescence as an early indication of marine fish spoilage', *European Journal of Applied Microbiology and Biotechnology* (1980); Q/Q5/22/13, 'Chilling sensitivity of avocado fruit at different stages of the respiratory climacteric', *American Society for Horticultural Science* (1976); Q/Q5/23/6, 'Transport of bananas at ambient temperatures using polyethylene bags', *Tropical Agriculture*, the journal of the Faculty of Agriculture (Imperial College of Tropical Agriculture) University of the West Indies (1971).

<sup>391</sup> MSCA Q5/38/1, Nathan Goldenberg, C.G. Sheppey, J.N. Robson, 'Some tentative bacteriological standards for canned hams', *Annales de l'institut pasteur de Lille, 1er Symposium International de Bacteriologie Alimentaire* (1955); Q5/38/22, Nathan Goldenberg and Harry R Matheson, 'Off Flavours In Foods - A Summary of Experience 1948-1974', *Chemistry and Industry* (July, 1975); Q/Q5/38/25, Nathan Goldenberg, Stanley Hammond and Lance Firth, 'The Bulk Shipment of Apples: Inhibition of Superficial Scald

amount of money in the provision of financial support to universities and colleges in Israel during the second half of the twentieth century for the purposes of food and agricultural research. A report by Nathan Goldenberg in 1982, entitled 'Israel: Research Projects' and sent to senior management, summarised the results of their funded projects from the previous seven years. Marks and Spencer invested £351,300 in these projects in 1982. Using the metric from the 'MeasuringWorth' website, this has an equivalent economic cost of £2,135,000 in 2015.<sup>392</sup> Goldenberg explained that of the twelve projects sponsored by the company only two, 'The Solar Heating of Soils' at Hebrew University and 'Shamouti Oranges' at Ben Gurion University, were of direct benefit to the company, with the former resulting in higher yields and less disease in tomato crops.<sup>393</sup> The twelve research projects financed at Israeli academic institutions financed by Marks and Spencer were summarised in this table:

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by Oil-impregnated Paper', *Journal of the Science of Food and Agriculture*, vol. 30 (1979) pp. 377 - 380.

<sup>392</sup> [accessed online at [www.measuringworth.com](http://www.measuringworth.com) on 17<sup>th</sup> January 2015].

<sup>393</sup> MSCA, Q/Q5/8/2, Nathan Goldenberg, 'Israel - Research projects', 6<sup>th</sup> July 1982, p. 1.

Figure 3

Source: MSCA, Q/Q5/8/2, Nathan Goldenberg, 'Israel - Research projects', 6<sup>th</sup> July 1982, appendix 1.

	Cost (£)	No. of years work	Completed	Last Payment Due	Value to M&S	Value to University or to Israeli Industry
1. Technion	2,500	1	Yes	-	None	None
2. Technion	14,000	2	Yes	-	None	Yes
3. Weizmann Institute	30,000	2	Yes	-	None	None
4. Weizmann Institute	58,800	3	Yes	-	Possible	Yes
5. "R&D" Authority	45,000	3	Yes	-	Probable	Yes
6. "R&D" Authority	27,500	2	Yes	-	None	Yes
7. Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University	35,000	7	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
8. Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University	33,000	3	Yes	-	Yes	Yes
9. Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University	21,000	3	Yes	-	No	?
10. Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University	60,000	4	No	1983	Probable	Yes
11. Faculty of Genetics Hebrew University	19,500	2	Yes	-	Probable	Yes
12. Faculty of Agriculture Hebrew University	5,000	1	No	-	Probable	Yes
	<b>£351,300</b>					



Whilst the majority of these financed research projects were classed as being of 'probable' or 'possible' value to Marks and Spencer, and five judged to have been of no value to the company, Goldenberg argued for the company to continue to support these Israeli institutions on the grounds of maintaining an awareness of new research. For example, in his discussion of the Weizmann Institute, which had not produced any directly research that was directly of use to the company, Goldenberg stated:

We should continue to give financial support to the Weizmann Institute, although this is largely devoted to academic research and not so much to education or applied research. Such financial support will make it much easier for Marks and Spencer personnel to be aware of relevant research projects and to obtain valuable technical 'know-how'.<sup>394</sup>

Thus, whilst in the 1980s the company's employees may not have considered themselves to occupy a role as inventors or researchers *per se*, Marks and Spencer had historically placed a great deal of importance upon being aware of the latest technological inventions and being able to apply these to improve and refine its own retail practices.

The application of food technology within the company was primarily focussed on the development of four key areas: making food more affordable; more convenient; increasing the variety of products on offer, and increasing quality. The first three of these areas correspond to what this thesis argues were the defining features of the 'British' diet in the twentieth century. The fourth area, quality, was a means by

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<sup>394</sup> Goldenberg, 'Israel - Research projects', p. 3.

which Marks and Spencer was able to differentiate itself from its competitors. As noted by Benson, this had been a popular value in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century advertisements.<sup>395</sup> By placing this emphasis on improving the quality of their food products through the application of new technologies, the company was able to build consumer trust and loyalty and build a reputation for itself as a retailer of quality food products which represented value for money. Unlike garments or textiles, the quality of a food product is not truly apparent until the point of consumption. This is the very reason why the company went to such great lengths and to such great expense in technological development, as it helped to ensure the most visually appealing presentation of Marks and Spencer food products, both in packaging and in the physical form of the products themselves.

In the archival sources that have survived concerning the development of fruit retailing at Marks and Spencer, it is clear that any notions of the 'exotic' were of secondary importance to the application of technology which allowed the company to increase the quality, variety, affordability and convenience of their product offering. A key distinction to make within this discussion is that, for fruit, ideas of convenience took on a slightly different form from that which will be seen with the development of chilled ready meals in Chapter 6. Rather than the idea of convenience conceptualised as saving time and labour at the point of consumption, namely within the homes and kitchens of consumers, convenience in fruit was instead tethered to increased variety. As early as January 1954, before the end of rationing in Britain, the company was declaring that it was now able to offer

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<sup>395</sup> Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain*, p. 47.

‘Oranges as an “all-the-year-round fruit”’.<sup>396</sup> In the report of a research trip to Israel in 1959 and sent to Marcus Sieff, Nathan Goldenberg described the balance of variety, convenience and quality in establishing new lines of tomatoes:

Production of tomatoes of the ‘MoneyMaker’ variety (season January - March inclusive) is at present about 300 tons p.a. but will be considerably greater in 2 - 3 years. This fits in with our requirements for a Winter crop of tomatoes, provided their quality and condition are satisfactory.<sup>397</sup>

Through increasing the variety of tomatoes that the company offered, the company was able to directly improve the convenience of their products for British consumers: making tomatoes more convenient by ensuring year-round supply, even during the winter months. Goldenberg explicitly linked these issues with quality, alluding to the exacting standards of Marks and Spencer and emphasising the importance of maintaining the standards of its food products.

In recent years, both Marks and Spencer and Sainsbury have laid claim to being the first food retailer to bring avocados to British consumers.<sup>398</sup> However, from a study of the primary material available in the Marks and Spencer archive it has not been possible to affirm these claims definitively. What is of greatest historical interest is not which of these companies was first to market, but rather how the ‘exotic’ was conceived of and where ideas of selling ‘exotic’ food products ranked in the decision making processes of British food retailers in the twentieth century. Whilst this thesis focuses on the retailing practices of Marks and Spencer, it would be of interest to

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<sup>396</sup> *St Michael News*, Food Special (January, 1954) p. 3.

<sup>397</sup> MSCA, Q5/36/12, Nathan Goldenberg, ‘Notes on Trips to Israel 1959 - 1968’, Nathan Goldenberg note to Marcus J. Sieff, 7<sup>th</sup> April 1959 - 29<sup>th</sup> February 1968, pp. 8 - 9.

<sup>398</sup> ‘Sainsbury, M&S... and the great ad-vocado war’, *Daily Mail*, 25<sup>th</sup> May 2009.

explore these issues within the context of other British food retailers in future research. In a television advertisement from 2009, celebrating the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the company, the model Twiggy can be seen holding an avocado and telling viewers that Marks and Spencer: ‘brought us a taste of the exotic’.<sup>399</sup> Whilst this would seem to suggest that the selling of ‘exotic’ avocados was of a high order of concern for the company, the research papers of food technologist Nathan Goldenberg would instead indicate that avocados served as a vehicle for increasing the choice available for British consumers, and exemplified a means by which the company could apply new technologies to widening the variety of their product offering.

A passage in Nathan Goldenberg’s 1989 autobiography, *Thought for Food*, he recounted the early days of Marks and Spencer’s retailing of avocados: ‘On my first visit to Israel for M&S in 1959, we began to discuss the importation of Israeli avocados, which at that time were virtually unknown to the general public in the UK.’<sup>400</sup> The relative lack of mass-market familiarity with avocados in the late 1950s is corroborated by Penny Summerfield. In her discussion of the changes in the experiences of women in post-war British society, Summerfield explained that ‘[b]y the 1960s five out of six women saw at least one magazine per week which urged upon her the virtues of new discoveries such as the delicatessen and the avocado’.<sup>401</sup> The novelty of avocados in the 1960s was borne out in Goldenberg’s text, where he explained the first sale of avocados by the company:

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<sup>399</sup> Marks and Spencer, 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary advertisement, 00:14 [accessed online at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4V9K6KtniY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4V9K6KtniY) on 12<sup>th</sup> June 2014].

<sup>400</sup> Goldenberg, *Thought for Food*, p. 163.

<sup>401</sup> Penny Summerfield, ‘Women in Britain since 1945: companionate marriage and the double burden’ in James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds.), *Understanding Post-War British Society* (London: Routledge, 1994) p. 61.

We called them - correctly - Avocado Pears, and put them out for sale without any instructions as to how they should be prepared or eaten. We soon knew better! A lady came back one day to our Manchester Store and complained about their poor quality. Because they were called 'Avocado Pears', she had peeled them, removed the stone, stewed them and then served them as a dessert with custard! No wonder she complained.<sup>402</sup>

The lack of mass-market consumer familiarity with this particular food product is evident in the anecdote from Goldenberg. No date was given for this first sale of avocados in Goldenberg's autobiography and, unfortunately, there are no surviving checking lists in the company's archive which date from the period to verify these claims or pinpoint the first stores in which they were sold and in what quantities. However, it is interesting to note that the company did not consider in advance the need to inform its customers how to consume this new food product. Instead, this was trialled in its stores and the company responded directly to feedback from the customers themselves. Goldenberg then went on to give details about the role Marks and Spencer played in informing and educating their customers on new food products:

We rapidly learned the lesson: from then on, the word 'pears' was dropped and only the word 'avocado' used; all Stores were issued with a leaflet to give to customers, describing the products as a 'salad' and explaining how it should be prepared and used. From that moment on Avocados became a popular product in the South East of England and spread only slowly to other parts of the country.<sup>403</sup>

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<sup>402</sup> Goldenberg, *Thought for Food*, p. 163.

<sup>403</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 163.

The company can clearly be seen to have been adapting their retail practices to take into account the needs and behaviours of their customers in this instance. It was responding to meet the demand of a defining feature of the British diet in the twentieth century, increased variety, and satisfying the desires of their customers for something new by selling avocados in their stores. The company was then paying careful attention to the response and behaviour of consumers and altering their marketing approach at the point of sale in order to take this into account. The excerpts from Goldenberg's autobiography demonstrate the way in which the relationship between Marks and Spencer and its customers was developing in the second half of the twentieth century. The company provided its customers with something new, a product which increased choice and variety, and then took on a role as educator: teaching and explaining to their customers how to consume this new product. This process was integral to the development of a loyal customer base and in building consumer trust in the company as a food retailer. Accompanied at all times by its commitment and investment in quality products, Marks and Spencer established itself as a trustworthy food retailer that customers could rely on to provide them with convenient and high quality products at relatively affordable prices, and one which would always have something new in store for consumers to try in order to keep them coming back on a regular basis. In fulfilling this role as educator, the company was effectively taking its customers by the hand and teaching them to consume new food products. As the twentieth century progressed, these new products became increasingly convenient and processed and delivered a higher profit margin for the company. Thus, adopting a role as innovators and educators made sound commercial sense for the company in the long-term.

Technology played an important role in the history of food in twentieth-century Britain. Ultimately, this was a history of ever-increasing stages of ever-more sophisticated food processing which gradually brought about a seismic shift in where the responsibilities for food safety, hygiene and knowledge lay. This was manifest in the changing power dynamic in the relationship between food retailers and food consumers. Increasing stages of processing served to incrementally distance consumers from the very food they were consuming; physically, geographically and emotionally. As part of this process, the defining features of the 'British' diet became ever more prevalent: affordability, variety and, particularly from the 1970s, convenience. From a consumer perspective, choosing to purchase food from multiple retailers increased the likelihood of these core motivations being met and, through these continued consumption choices, had the knock-on effect of increasing economies of scale and encouraging competition in the market, thus driving the prices of key commodities down even further and spurring retailers to expand the range of products on offer in order to satisfy consumers' demands for variety and to continue to gain their loyalty and trust. These defining features of the 'British' diet are not mutually exclusive: offering more 'convenient' food items adds to the variety of products on offer; convenience may also create the impression of economy, particularly when it meets an immediate need; increasing the variety of goods on offer can create competition which results in increased affordability. The ultimate fruition of the retailing practices developed in the middle of the twentieth century by Marks and Spencer was borne in their creation of the chilled ready meals sector in 1979, as will be explored in chapter 6.

## Chapter 6 - Chilled ready meals case study

In this final chapter the opportunities for using the relationship between food retailers and consumers as a lens with which to explore British social history are exemplified. This chapter takes a case study approach to show how a detailed and focused investigation of the impact and historical context of one food product can shed new light on a wide range of complex, and often inextricably linked, historical issues. Examining the creation of the chilled ready meals sector in the UK in 1979, and its ensuing growth and success over the following decades, provides valuable insights into areas of significant social change and continuity in twentieth-century British consumer society. In 1979 Marks and Spencer launched the first chilled ready meal in the UK, the chicken Kiev. In doing so it created a sector for pre-prepared food which market analysts Mintel valued at £2.7bn p.a. in 2010.<sup>404</sup> Doel and Wrigley have considered the significance of the chilled ready meal within networks of supply, distribution and retailing from social geography and business history perspectives.<sup>405</sup> Both of these scholars emphasised the important role played by retailers' own-brand products (and at the beginning these chilled ready meals were almost exclusively own-brand) in the reorganisation of power within the British food system. This chapter builds and expands upon research in this area by exploring the social and cultural context in which this sector emerged, the innovative retailing

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<sup>404</sup> Mintel, *Chilled and Frozen Ready Meals - UK* (May, 2010).

<sup>405</sup> Christine Doel, 'Market Development and Organizational Change: The Case of the Food Industry' in Neil Wrigley and Michelle Lowe (eds.), *Retailing, Consumption and Capital: Towards a New Retail Geography* (Harlow: Longman, 1996) pp. 48 - 67; Neil Wrigley, 'How British retailers have shaped food choice' in Anne Murcott (ed.), *The Nation's Diet: The Social Science of Food Choice* (London: Longman, 1998) pp. 112 - 128.



strategies of Marks and Spencer and the impact that these strategies had on the way people consumed food in Britain.

This case study is of historical interest because the creation of the chilled ready meals sector built upon a series of technological and retail innovations and tapped into several rich veins of social change. With regards to the overarching question of this thesis, the study of this sector illustrates a point in time when Marks and Spencer responded directly to changes in consumer demand and was able to influence a real shift in consumer behaviour through its innovative retailing strategies. In this instance the change in consumer demand was a longer-term demand for skinless, boneless, bloodless chicken breast fillets and wider trends for more processed and 'convenient' food products; the innovative retailing strategies of Marks and Spencer involved adding value to these chicken breast fillets by carrying out various stages of processing and preparation, realising the full potential of its cold-chain system and its relationship with their food retail practices. It may be argued that the shift in consumer behaviour effected by these retailing strategies was, at its core, a fundamental shift in the place of food in the day-to-day lives of a significant number of people in Britain. These behaviour shifts were manifest in a number of ways, including significant and long-term changes in the way people bought and consumed food, a redefinition of what constituted as cooking, and a reconfiguration of the role of food and eating in constructs of sociability.

Doel and Wrigley's work in the late 1990s was the only point at which the importance of the chilled ready meals sector was the main focus of scholarly

research. This chapter, therefore, makes a first attempt to situate this important development in the history of food in Britain within its social and cultural context. The secondary literature which informs the issues considered is necessarily multi-disciplinary in scope, drawing upon scholarship from sociology, social geography, economics, and consumer, business and retail history. Much of the interesting research in this area arose as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's 'The Nation's Diet' research programme in the 1990s, which explored the social science of food choice from a variety of angles situated at various points in the food system, from ethnographies of food consumption to the retailing strategies of British food retailers.<sup>406</sup> From a sociological perspective, the work of sociologist Alan Warde and his concept of the antinomies of taste is particularly pertinent in this discussion. Warde argued that food choice can be conceived of as encompassing eight opposing ideas: novelty and tradition, health and indulgence, economy and extravagance, and care and convenience.<sup>407</sup> This idea will be used here to as a means of analysing the motives behind food purchasing decisions and to aid understanding of the social context in which these decisions were being made. Within the history of British retailing, chilled ready meals serve as an important example of a retailer-led innovation, and one which had a wide-reaching impact on consumer behaviour. Drawing upon a series of innovations in food technology and retailing, the creation of this sector required a solid foundation of consumer trust in British food retailers and built upon the unusual position of Marks and Spencer in the market as a retailer which sold only own-brand products and had established atypical relationships with their suppliers as a result of their business model and exacting standards.

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<sup>406</sup> Murcott (ed.), *The Nation's Diet*.

<sup>407</sup> Alan Warde, *Consumption, Food and Taste* (London: Sage Publications, 1997) p. 3.

As part of the ESRC-funded programme 'The Nation's Diet' (1992 - 1998) the geographer Neil Wrigley used the chilled ready meals sector as a case study to exemplify the ways in which British retailers have shaped food choice. He argued that the 1980s saw a transformation of the nation's diet as a result of the innovative practices of British food retailers and, in particular, highlights the importance of own-brand products in leveraging power in the favour of retailers within the system of food supply in the UK. Using the chilled ready meals sector as a key example of retailers' own-brand products, Wrigley saw the use of own-brands as being instrumental in shifting the balance of power within the British food industry in favour of retailers, and thus changing the dynamics of the industry as responsive to 'demand pull' rather than the supply-push mechanism previously wielded by British manufacturers.<sup>408</sup> This was reinforced by Doel's argument that the dynamic structure of supply inherent within retailer's own-branded product ranges created significant changes across the British food supply industry. Doel went so far as to argue that chilled ready meals were 'of immense symbolic significance ... visibly epitomising the changing dynamics and shifting power balance within the food industry'.<sup>409</sup> She drew attention to an article in the *Financial Times* in 1988 which, in reflecting on the success of the chilled ready meals sector in the preceding decade, expresses surprise in the role of Marks and Spencer as a food retailer in driving forward this innovation with the sector being 'discovered, exploited and continues to be dominated not by a manufacturer but by the retailer Marks and Spencer... chilled ready meals have emerged as the first major market segment to be dominated by own-label goods'.<sup>410</sup> These arguments can be expanded upon to demonstrate that as well as being

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<sup>408</sup> Wrigley, 'How British retailers have shaped food choice', p. 117.

<sup>409</sup> Doel, 'Market Development and Organizational Change: The Case of the Food Industry', p. 55.

<sup>410</sup> 'Brand new thinking', *Financial Times*, 1<sup>st</sup> February 1988.

symbolic of a power-shift, chilled ready meals also epitomised a shift in the social and cultural history of Britain as a nation of consumers.

Evidence for the creation of the chilled ready meals sector as an example of a retailer-led innovation can be found in the oral history interviews given by current and former employees of Marks and Spencer's food department, conducted as part of the British Library's National Life Stories Collection project 'Food: From Source to Sales point', which ran between 1997 and 2007.<sup>411</sup> The most pertinent, for the purposes of this research, was the interview given by Cathy Chapman. Chapman was a food product developer at Marks and Spencer and is credited with introducing chilled recipe dishes to the British public. She is currently employed by the company as the head of food product development and innovation.<sup>412</sup> Chapman explained the difficulties the food development department had in establishing a manufacturing method for poultry processing with their suppliers:

The first person to do that coated, that breadcrumb development was Ranex in East Anglia. But again the production technology was actually in Holland because it was unknown and nobody in the country did it we worked with a company called Whitwoods and we got donut fryers installed in the poultry suppliers. We had no prepared food suppliers in those days, we just had meat suppliers: lamb suppliers; chicken suppliers; pig suppliers. There was no one else. There were a couple of frozen food suppliers that we had but we weren't starting where frozen food was. We were starting in a fresh food arena so we

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<sup>411</sup> Further information about this project can be found in *National Life Stories Annual Reports and Newsletters 2006/7 report* [accessed online at [www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/sound/ohist/ohnls/nlsfood/foodindepth.pdf](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/findhelprestype/sound/ohist/ohnls/nlsfood/foodindepth.pdf) on 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010].

<sup>412</sup> Kate Salter, 'Cathy Chapman: the woman who changed the way we eat', *Sunday Telegraph*, supplement *Stella* magazine, 10<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

only had our primary suppliers to work with and we got donut fryers and instead of putting the donuts in a row you would put the chicken breast in a row and they had been hand-dipped in egg and hand-coated and hand-turned in breadcrumbs and then flash-fried in this donut fryer.<sup>413</sup>

Within this discussion it is possible to begin to pin down the structure of the company's meat supply chains in the 1970s, with manufacturers producing only one kind of meat and minimal processing taking place before the products reached consumers. Chapman discussed her enjoyment of working in this wholly new area of production, with notions of anxiety notable by their absence, instead replaced by an almost palpable sense of excitement. In discussing her working relationship with the company's poultry suppliers, she explained that 'they were just so adventurous. They were also writing on blank pieces of paper. They enjoyed being the first, they enjoyed the success and they enjoyed the massive growth that came with that success'.<sup>414</sup> This adds an extra dimension of Doel and Wrigley's argument that chilled ready meals symbolised a power-shift in favour of retailers and constituted a retailer-led innovation. Certainly, this was a retailing innovation that was led by a retailer. However, Marks and Spencer was not operating in a vacuum and it was the company's somewhat exceptional relationship with their suppliers which meant that it was uniquely placed within the British food system to lead innovation in this area. Further evidence of this relationship was provided by Cathy Chapman when she explained that even by the time she left her post at the company in 1995, the manufacturing of chicken Kiev chilled ready meals remained exclusive to one

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<sup>413</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2 side A.

<sup>414</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2 side A.

supplier.<sup>415</sup> Whilst commercially prudent for Marks and Spencer, as it meant that the exact manufacturing process for this recipe dish was not known throughout the industry, it also shows that this retailer-led innovation could not have occurred without the relationships the company had established with its poultry suppliers.

A key question within this investigation is why chicken Kiev's were the first chilled ready meal. The answer to this lies in what is arguably a further highly significant example of retailer-led innovation in the history of food in the twentieth century: chicken production and consumption in Britain. Data published by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in December 2013 shows the average consumption of meat products per person per week in grams between 1974 and 2013. Whilst the consumption of beef, pork and other meat products has been in almost constant decline since the mid-1970s, the average weekly consumption of chicken and ready meals has increased by 67 per cent and 507 per cent respectively over the same time period.<sup>416</sup>

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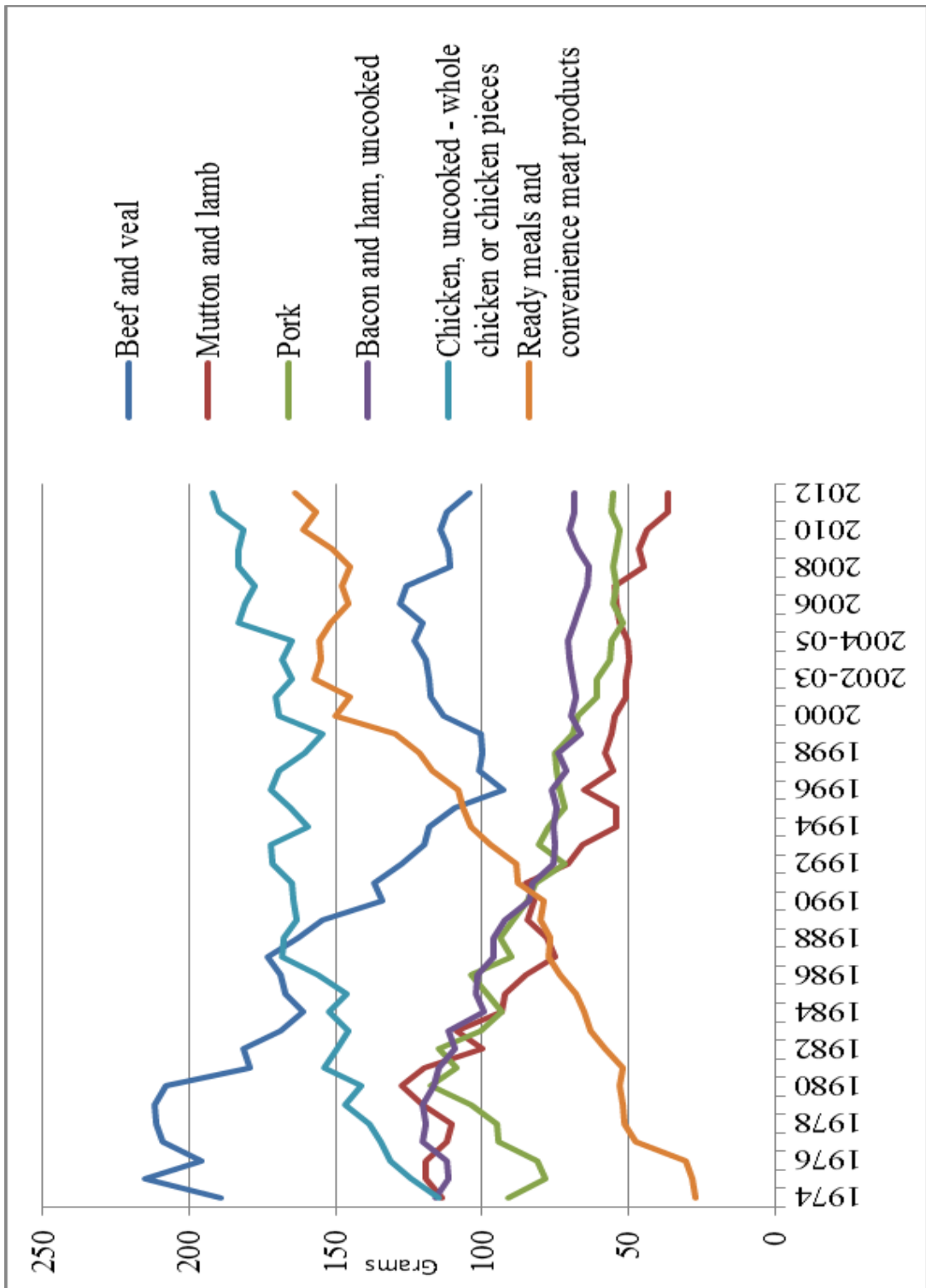
<sup>415</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15667, tape 3, side B and F15666, tape 2, side A.

<sup>416</sup> Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, 'UK - Household Purchases' in *Family Food Datasets* (December, 2013). It should be noted that the rapid decline in beef consumption in the 1990s was most likely a result of the BSE crisis in British cattle.

**Figure 4**

**Source:** Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, *Family Food*

*Datasets* (December, 2013).



Thus, since 1974 there have been significant and simultaneous increases in consumption of both chicken and ready meals and it may be inferred that these two developments in the social history of food in twentieth century Britain have gone hand in hand. After the last meat products came off the ration in 1954 consumption of beef, lamb and pork underwent a sudden increase, but in the following decades there occurred what the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food termed a ‘seemingly inexorable rise in poultry consumption’.<sup>417</sup> In 1991 the Ministry declared that ‘poultry is now more important than beef, yet 40 years ago chicken was essentially a once-a-year treat at Christmas’.<sup>418</sup> Godley and Williams have described this as a ‘revolution in the British diet’, with chicken consumption in the UK increasing from 1million per year in 1950 to over 200 million in 1967.<sup>419</sup> Yet in the 1950s the primary function of chickens in the UK was to provide eggs, with chicken meat seen as a luxury with the majority coming mainly from old commercial layers that were no longer fit for purpose or from small-scale and domestic animal husbandry.<sup>420</sup> Indeed, so insignificant was the consumption of chicken in wartime Britain that it was not even included in rationing.

Godley and Williams have argued that this rapid intensification of British poultry production and consumption in the second half of the twentieth century was a retailer-led innovation, with Sainsbury taking on an important role as an intermediary between producers and consumers. They have outlined the role of

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<sup>417</sup> Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, *Fifty Years of the National Food Survey, 1940 - 1990* (London: HMSO, 1991) p. 50.

<sup>418</sup> *Fifty Years of the National Food Survey*, p. 50.

<sup>419</sup> Andrew Godley and Bridget Williams, ‘The Chicken, the Factory Farm, and the Supermarket: The Emergence of the Modern Poultry Industry in Britain’ in Warren Belasco and Roger Horowitz (eds.), *Food Chains: From Farmyard to Shopping Cart* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009) p. 47.

<sup>420</sup> Godley and Williams, ‘The Chicken, the Factory Farm, and the Supermarket’, p. 50.



Sainsbury as ‘industry co-ordinator’ in the 1950s, driving forward standardisation with their poultry suppliers in order to bring to market eviscerated frozen chickens which offered customers greater convenience and could be sold in their self-service stores.<sup>421</sup> In many respects this case study builds upon their analysis of the role of food retailers in product innovation, with Marks and Spencer taking on a comparable role from the 1970s onwards in building a market for prepared recipe dishes and convenience meat products.

Cathy Chapman explained that it was consumer demand for chicken that led Marks and Spencer’s retailing practices in their creation of the chilled ready meals sector. In particular, it was fresh, bloodless, skinless, boneless chicken breast meat that consumers were demanding in the 1970s. She has explained that their rationale for choosing chicken as the first chilled recipe dish was: ‘how can I add value to that concept because I know that it sells and if I do x to it that will sell?’<sup>422</sup> Chapman said that at that time ‘the customer wanted breast meat. Boneless, white meat, that’s what they wanted so you had to give it to them. You charge a premium for that but they still pay for it.’<sup>423</sup> In this way it is very clear in this instance the impetus for the creation of the chilled ready meals sector was Marks and Spencer, as a food retailer, responding directly to the demands of their consumers. Once again, the role of the company in leading this innovation is exemplified by their experience in getting suppliers to carry out increasing levels of poultry processing. Chapman recalled:

We actually couldn’t get one of our British poultry suppliers to go to the added labour of taking the skin off and the bone out of the chicken breast fillets. We

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<sup>421</sup> Godley and Williams, ‘The Chicken, the Factory Farm, and the Supermarket’.

<sup>422</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

<sup>423</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

had to go to France, where added value raw poultry, added value raw meat has always been far more sophisticated than anything this country was able to offer. So we literally had to go to Europe and get an EEC-approved supplier to do that hand labour for us and of course the moment we put a pack of these skinless chicken breasts on the counter was just fantastic. That was what the customer wanted. She didn't want to have to take the bone out and take the skin off herself. And once the British suppliers realised, the tiger by the tail, they decided they would do it.<sup>424</sup>

Thus, not only does the simple question of 'why chicken?' shed light upon the role of retailers in influencing the British diet and bringing wholly new products to market, it also gives weight to the concept of national diets. By this it is meant that adopting a case study approach and examining the history of one product, the organisation of food supply chains along national lines is revealed. In this instance, whilst the British public were demanding processed chicken, the food processing technology had been developed in France and was then imported to the UK. As with the hygienic practices of food retailers in chapter 4 and the introduction of new tastes in chapter 5, it is evident that in the history of food retailing there are many examples of technological know-how and expert retailing knowledge being transferred internationally within the increasingly global food industry.

In order for chicken to become a commodity for mass consumption, networks and technologies used in its transportation, storage and retailing had to be transformed. The creation of the cold chain system serves as a further example of British food retailers leading the way with their innovative retail practices in response to changes

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<sup>424</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

in consumer demand, using cutting-edge technologies to shape changes in consumer behaviours. Thus, the success of the chilled ready meals sector built upon a series of previous retailing innovations, of which Marks and Spencer was well placed to take full advantage. Cold chain storage was arguably the most significant technological development in food preservation, and thus distribution, in the twentieth century. Again, the unusual nature of the company's relationship with their suppliers meant that it was well-positioned to capitalise upon the potential of cold chain technology within British food retailing.

However, a contrasting viewpoint is found in the research papers of the Marks and Spencer poultry department. In a document entitled 'Priorities in Poultry Research and Development: Poultry Research and the Consumer', a food technologist employed by the company explained that 'research into consumer preference seems to have little practical value. People generally do not know what they want until they see what they get.' This source suggests that rather than responding directly to changes in consumer preference, the company saw itself as taking an active role in shaping consumers' expectations and behaviours. The food technologist, R. L. Stephens, situated the issue of consumer preference firmly within concepts of value for money, rather than Chapman's wider definition of choices consumers made based on the physical attributes of the products themselves:

During recent years much effort has been applied to the development of new poultry products, and particularly of cooked and prepared dishes using poultry. So far however, few of these products have become popular and the total volume is still relatively very small. As red meat becomes more and more expensive we can expect poultry based dishes to become more attractive to the

housewife. The development of such products is a matter of commercial technology and will certainly receive the attention required.<sup>425</sup>

This report, therefore, placed an emphasis on consumer concepts of ‘value’ in food items and suggests that the expense of meat products in relation to each other was a driving factor in the consumption choices made by consumers. The sources also gives a sense that in the mid-1970s the company’s ideas around the potential for chilled ready meals using poultry were still in their infancy, which demonstrates how quickly this particular product innovation moved from conception and research to implementation. This source from Stephens also articulates the company’s perception of itself as a retailer of food products: educating their customers in how to consume these new items. Certainly, Stephens’ remarks about how the company viewed and valued research into consumer preference (or lack thereof) was reflected in the actions of Marks and Spencer in their operations as a food retailer where, as previously mentioned, the company did not commission or conduct any market research.<sup>426</sup>

Primary material from Marks and Spencer’s food research department clearly shows the importance placed upon poultry research by the company. More specifically the research papers of Nathan Goldenberg contain a wealth of information both from internal studies and external research papers, concerning the safety and handling of chicken.<sup>427</sup> Indeed, on a number of occasions the research conducted by members of

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<sup>425</sup> Stephens, p. 4.

<sup>426</sup> To contextualise this within the modern-day operations of the company, Marks and Spencer now conduct extensive market research: ‘Prudent M&S puts market research first’, the *Independent*, 11<sup>th</sup> July 2010.

<sup>427</sup> MSCA, Q/Q5/17/1, ‘The effect of Tetracycline compounds on the storage life and Microbiology of chilled eviscerated poultry’, 2<sup>nd</sup> June 1959; Q/Q5/17/2, ‘Poultry Products Technology - Refrigerated storage of poultry meat’ (1966); Q/Q5/17/7, ‘Poultry meat

the Marks and Spencer food research department was published in peer reviewed journals. A key example is a paper from senior poultry technologist Peel Holroyd on the requirements of poultry retailers and consumers which was presented at the 12th Poultry Science Symposium, Growth and Poultry Meat Production in 1976, again at the Israel Branch of the World's Poultry Science Association National Conference in Tel-Aviv in 1978 and was published as part of an edited collection in 1977.<sup>428</sup> The level of detail and the breadth of this research material, and that it has been preserved and stored in the company's business archive, demonstrates the significance of poultry research to the company and the esteem with which poultry research and development was held within the organisation.

Building upon, and in turn influencing, the concepts of hygiene and cleanliness as discussed in chapter 4, cold chain storage involves stages of storage and distribution which maintain food products within a safe range of temperatures. This inhibits the growth of bacteria and helps to maintain freshness. Within the creation of the chilled ready meals sector, Marks and Spencer was able to draw upon its previously established food supply distribution systems and equipment already in place in stores across the UK. Geographer Susanne Friedberg has discussed moral economies and the food chain, noting the suspicion with which this new innovation was held as its use became widespread and raising ideas about transparency and the potential for food fraud to occur when the true age and the safety of meat is obscured by

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hygiene with reference to the European Economic Community (EEC) directive' (1975); Q/Q5/17/8, 'Microbiological problems of poultry at refrigerator temperatures' (1976).

<sup>428</sup> P. H. Holroyd, 'The Requirement of the Retailer and Consumer', in K. N. Boorman and B.J.Wilson (eds.), *Growth and Poultry Meat Production* (Edinburgh: British Poultry Science Ltd., 1977) pp. 341 - 350.

technology innovations.<sup>429</sup> The company invested heavily in their cold chain system in the early 1980s, as a result of the success of chilled ready meals. In 1982, an article in *St Michael News* announced that ‘Camden Town and Windsor stores have both warmed to new refrigeration equipment. On trial are a British chilled food display unit and a frozen food unit from America.’<sup>430</sup> That this was considered newsworthy is particularly interesting, as it indicates the importance with which the company held their cold chain system. This is particularly true of an article from 1984 entitled ‘Cold chain food boom met by same day delivery’:

Efforts are being made to help stores and depots cope with huge increases in cold chain foods. As Transport Manager David Anderson explained, the volume of cold chain foods has gone up by more than 20 per cent in the last year ... Ten stores ... have for the last 12 months been receiving evening deliveries ... ‘Suppliers, depots and stores are having to re-organise their staffing’ said Mr Anderson, manufacturers and BOC are having to re-establish production and delivery patterns.<sup>431</sup>

This article gives a sense of the impact that the commercial success of chilled produce had on the company’s retailing practices. Responding to consumer demands and then using their innovative retailing practices to shape consumer behaviour, in turn impacted upon their practices as a food retailer and the nature of their food supply chains. The company invested heavily in their cold chain capabilities, clearly seeing this as a priority area to build upon their success in chilled ready meals:

A multi-million pound programme to convert refrigeration in all stores was launched this month. The decision to go ahead was taken after a successful trial

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<sup>429</sup> Susanne Freidberg, *Fresh: a Perishable History* (London: Belknap, 2009).

<sup>430</sup> ‘Cold units are hot favourites’, *St Michael News* (February, 1982) p. 6.

<sup>431</sup> ‘Cold chain food boom met by same day delivery’, *St Michael News* (September, 1984) p. 3.

at Harrow last year. This set out to show that it made commercial sense to extend the keeping life of most chilled lines from one to three nights by reducing the temperature on selected display cases as low as possible without risking freezing. By November almost half the existing cold chain cases - a minimum of 40 per cent - in all stores will be converted to the new lower temperature. 'This is a major step forward for the food division which enables us to establish a significant lead in the handling of fresh foods', said Jim Osbond, food group executive. And the advantages will be exciting – sales on Saturdays and Mondays will improve, there will be less waste and greater flexibility for bolder displays ... the first departments to benefit will be fresh meat and poultry.<sup>432</sup>

Marks and Spencer evidently saw the commercial advantages offered by maximising the potential of their cold chain system, positioning itself firmly at the forefront of innovation in fresh food in the UK and prioritising its work in poultry product development.

However, the cold chain did not stop at the refrigerated shelves of Marks and Spencer stores. Indeed, the weakest link in the chain was what happened to food once it was in the baskets of consumers. The success of the chilled ready meals sector, and the safety of these processed poultry products, was highly dependent upon the development of domestic technologies, namely domestic fridge/freezers and microwaves ovens. The responsibility for maintaining the chain was felt at all stages of the food system, but Marks and Spencer and other food retailers had the additional role of informing their consumers about how to consume these products

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<sup>432</sup> 'Colder cold chain', *St Michael News* (March, 1983) p. 1.

safely and ensure that the quality of the food was maintained until the point of consumption. In this sense, it took on additional responsibilities for educating its customers in how to consume these new food products and, again, functioned as a dynamic intermediary in the food supply chain: translating these innovative technologies and the scientific technicalities of cold chain storage into easy-to-follow instructions which could be understood by consumers. The cardboard overlay packaging of a portion of two chicken Kievs from 1997 explains that customers should keep the product refrigerated and between the temperatures of 0°C and +4°C. On the front of the packaging it is explained that the product is suitable for home freezing, using an easily-recognisable freezer sign of a snowflake which was used across Marks and Spencer's food products, and further information is given on the reverse to 'freeze on day of purchase, use within 1 month, defrost thoroughly before cooking'.<sup>433</sup> Unfortunately, the original packaging of the 1979 product has not been preserved in the company's archive. However, it is evident that the company was using the packaging of food products as a point at which to inform customers of food safety and the importance of the consumers' own role within the cold chain system. The packaging discussed evidently presumes ownership on the behalf of consumers of both a domestic refrigerator and freezer in order to be able to carry out the instructions for the safe storage and consumption of the product.

Ownership of these key domestic appliances increased dramatically in the second half of the twentieth century. In order to be able to consume these new chilled recipe dishes, it was first necessary to own the appliances required to maintain the cold chain at home and cook these pre-prepared meals. Thus, access to these domestic

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<sup>433</sup> MSCA, T600/361, 'Packaging of St Michael 2 chicken kiev portions' (1997).



technologies was a means of gaining entry to this new sector of food as a consumer. According to figures from the *General Household Survey* in 1995, ownership of deep freezers increased from 30 per cent in 1978 to 89 per cent in 1995, whilst access to microwave ovens grew from around 22 per cent in 1986 to 70 per cent in 1995.<sup>434</sup> Refrigerators were owned by 73 per cent of households in 1972, rising to 95 per cent of households by 1985. Thus, at the time that Marks and Spencer launched the first chilled ready meals, the ownership of the necessary domestic appliances was widespread across the British population, meaning that a large potential market of consumers had the necessary equipment to participate in this new type of food consumption. It is worth noting that from 1979, when chilled ready meals were launched, the survey attributed ownership of fridge freezers to both refrigerators and freezers.<sup>435</sup> Thus, the ownership of refrigerators underwent a dramatic transformation during the twentieth century, from being the luxurious consumption choice of an elite few to a mass-consumed commodity to the extent that by the 1980s they become an essential part of participating in modern life.

Leading on from this, an interesting facet of this discussion is uncovered by examining the portion sizes of the chilled ready meals. Many of the first wave of these chilled recipe dishes sold by Marks and Spencer were single-serving portions. The portion size of these chilled ready meals therefore provides an interesting insight into contemporary social and cultural history. Analysis of number of people each pre-prepared recipe dish was intended to serve highlights several important historical socio-cultural trends, namely the rise in single person households and the changing

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<sup>434</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Living in Britain: Results from the 1995 General Household Survey* (London: HMSO, 1995) p. 27.

<sup>435</sup> *Living in Britain*, p. 38.

nature of mealtimes within the home. The *General Household Survey* of 1995 noted that the average household size in Britain reduced from 2.91 in 1971 to 2.4 in 1995, and explain this reduction as being a combination of an ageing population, a decrease in live births, an increase in single-person households, a rise in lone-parent families and a reduction in the proportion of large households with 5 or more persons.<sup>436</sup> The *Social Trends* report from 1998 showed that single-person households of people under pension age doubled from just 4 per cent of all households in 1961 to 8 per cent in 1981, and continued to increase to 12 per cent of households by 1996/7.<sup>437</sup>

Reports in *St Michael News* highlighted the importance of single portions in the continuing success of the chilled ready meals sector, with an article from 1984 clearly demonstrating the decision-making processes of the company in choosing portion sizes:

Going solo has taken on a new meaning for the recipe dish department following the success of one portion meals. The single serving size of moussaka has proved so popular that the department is concentrating 45 per cent of its development for the autumn on one portion meals. Selector Cathy Chapman said that single portions now account for a quarter of recipe dish sales. This autumn, chicken supreme, lasagne, spaghetti Bolognese, beef balls in tomato sauce with spaghetti, and beef stew and dumplings are all in single portions.

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<sup>436</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>437</sup> Office of National Statistics, *Social Trends 28* (London: HMSO, 1998).

The single portions offer customers a chance to try new dishes at easy prices and members of a family can each try something different.<sup>438</sup>

This source details the two distinct factors which Marks and Spencer identified in the behaviour of their customers for recipe dishes: single-person households demanding dishes to serve one; and families eating different meals and at different times. This case study of the chilled ready meals sector, therefore, offers an insight into how British food retailers perceived of the nature of mealtimes in Britain. Marks and Spencer was recognising and responding to trends and changes in the very nature of mealtimes within the family home. This is an enduring social and cultural trend which has attracted much media attention in recent times, with many news outlets framing this issue in moral terms.<sup>439</sup> A further point to this discussion may be the rise of vegetarianism in the UK, as raised in chapter 2, and the potential diversification of the dietary choices of family members at meal times. It may be ventured that single-portion sizes had the potential to cater to the burgeoning market sector fuelled by politically-conscious consumption choices of consumers. In 1984 there were two identifiably meat-free chilled ready meal sold by Marks and Spencer, aubergine parmigiana and an omelette meal and a frozen macaroni cheese dish.<sup>440</sup> The company also sold cookery books during the 1980s aimed specifically at vegetarian customers.<sup>441</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> 'Good return on singles', *St Michael News* (September, 1984) p. 4.

<sup>439</sup> 'British families don't eat together - and, if they do, it's often in front of the TV', *Telegraph*, 20<sup>th</sup> February 2013; 'One in 10 families never has an evening meal together', *Daily Mail*, 26<sup>th</sup> October 2010.

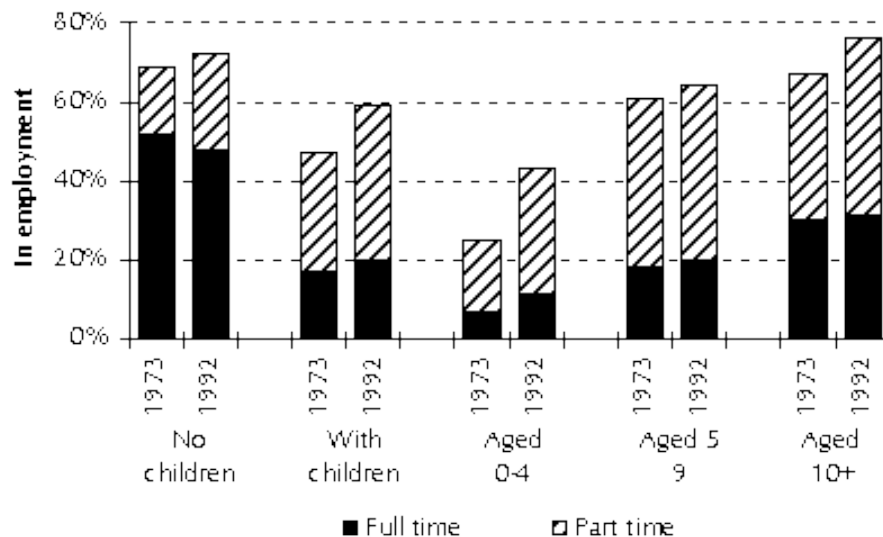
<sup>440</sup> '1984 Checking List', F.25 Recipe Dishes.

<sup>441</sup> MSCA, T27/1/29, Elaine Bastable, *Vegetarian Feast* (1985); T27/1/200, Sarah Bounds, *Seasonal Vegetarian* (1986).

The most significant social trend that the creation of the chilled ready meals sector was able to tap into, and take full advantage of, was the increasing participation of women in the British labour market. This was particularly true of women in part-time employment. The Equal Pay Act of 1970 had paved the way for better working conditions for women and the rate of female economic activity increased from just over 55 per cent in 1971 to 65 per cent in 1981.<sup>442</sup> The graph below shows the relationship between female employment and motherhood across this period and, most importantly, gives a more granular level of detail concerning the distribution of full-time and part-time work amongst women.<sup>443</sup>

**Figure 5**

**Source:** Office of National Statistics, 'Employment rate of women by whether they have children and age of youngest child', *General Household Survey* (London: HMSO, 1992).



<sup>442</sup> *Employment Gazette* (April, 1994) [accessed online at [www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=294](http://www.employment-studies.co.uk/pubs/summary.php?id=294) on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2012].

<sup>443</sup> Office of National Statistics, 'Employment rate of women by whether they have children and age of youngest child', *General Household Survey* (London: HMSO, 1992).

This highlights the difference between women's engagement in the labour force, according to the age of their children, and between those with children and those without. The starkest contrast is in the nature of female employment, as those with children were significantly more likely to be employed on a part-time basis. This point is of the utmost importance as it was precisely this trend in female employment that Marks and Spencer was able to tap into by offering a product which seemed to solve the dilemma of care versus convenience.

As discussed in chapter 1, the company conceived of its customers as 'housewives' throughout the period being examined. This continued into the 1970s with its creation of the chilled ready meals sector. Cathy Chapman explained that when she first developed the products in the late 1970s, 'it was that moment when you started getting the double income families, cash-rich/time-poor and all of those good things'.<sup>444</sup> The 'time-poor' element of this social context will be investigated next, but first it is necessary to consider the importance of women's work and rising disposable income of double income families. In 1979 the level of real household disposable income per head in the UK (adjusted to up-to-date values in 2011) was £7315, rising from just £3971 in 1954 at the end of rationing, and £5565 a decade earlier in 1969.<sup>445</sup> What this meant was that families were becoming increasingly affluent consumers, with increasing amounts of disposable income to spend as they saw fit. When viewed alongside the rates and nature of female engagement with the labour market, as outlined above, it is possible to begin to see the social context into which this new sector of the food market found success. Families where both parents

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<sup>444</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

<sup>445</sup> 'How UK incomes have risen (and fallen) since 1948', *Telegraph*, 30<sup>th</sup> March 2011. The article made use of data from the Office of National Statistics.

went out to work, and with a rising disposable income, could find an answer to their dilemma of providing food for their families whilst having less time to prepare a family meal. At a household level and on a daily basis, what this meant was an increase in disposable income to spend on food but less time with which to shop for food and prepare meals in the home.

Another aspect of this discussion is the geographical situation of Marks and Spencer on the British high street, a result of a long-standing policy to occupy prime large square-footage of store space on the main retail areas of UK towns and cities. Lewis & Hickey, an architectural firm that worked with Marks and Spencer throughout the twentieth century, wrote a history of their relationship with the company. In a report held in the Marks and Spencer company archive, it was explained that from the 1960s onwards the policy was to develop existing stores to have frontage in the newly created pedestrianized city centre shopping malls and to build new stores within these malls during the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>446</sup> The early 2000s saw a number of studies by social geographers into the concept of urban Britain's 'food deserts', the idea of city centres as being deficient in food retailers and commonly considered in conjunction with the access of low income consumers to fresh food products.<sup>447</sup>

Throughout the twentieth century, therefore, Marks and Spencer occupied a somewhat unusual position as a retailer of food situated in prime city centre retail

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<sup>446</sup> MSCA, HO/10/3/1/1/15, Lewis & Hickey, 'Design for Success: The store of the design & building of Marks & Spencer stores, 1922 - 1990', p. 22.

<sup>447</sup> See Neil Wrigley, "'Food deserts' in British cities: Policy context and research priorities', *Urban Studies*, vol. 39, no. 11 (2002) pp. 2029 - 2040; Steven Cummins and Sally McIntyre, "'Food deserts' - evidence and assumption in health policy making', *British Medical Journal*, vol. 325 (August, 2002) pp. 436 - 438; Tim Pearson *et al.*, 'Do 'food deserts' influence fruit and vegetable consumption? - a cross-sectional study', *Appetite*, vol. 45, no. 2 (October, 2005) pp. 195 - 197.

sites. This is of historical interest when considered as part of the issue of women, work and convenience food as these retail spaces were located close to bus and train stations in British towns and cities, which meant that the company's stores were occupying retail locations within walking distance of these transport hubs. The 1975 *National Travel Survey*, carried out by the Department of Transport, provides data on personal travel behaviour in the UK and looks at main mode of transport, with the data divided by age and gender.<sup>448</sup> It shows that significantly more women than men used public transportation as their main mode of transport for work purposes. This was true across each age group and for rail travel, buses and walking. Thus, as female participation of the labour market increased, so too did their use of public transport to get to and from their places of employment. As major supermarkets began to position themselves as out-of-town destinations for the weekly shop, with the vast car parks for their customers, Marks and Spencer stood steadfast as a city centre retailer from which food could be purchased. In bringing chilled ready meals to market the company was able to capitalise on their retail geography and was able to charge a premium for products which required little further preparation by consumers, other than putting in an oven or microwave. No sources suggest that these meals were intended to be eaten every day, rather they were perceived as luxury items which, to return to Warde's antinomies of taste, seemed to provide an answer to the tensions between consumer choices of care or convenience. Marks and Spencer stores may therefore be seen as serving as something of an oasis of convenient, luxury pre-prepared food products for cash-rich/time-poor double income families (and women in particular) in a city centre food desert during the latter decades of the twentieth century.

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<sup>448</sup> Department for Transport, *National Travel Survey* (London: HMSO, 1975) pp. 86 - 87.

Underpinning the social and cultural issues upon which the study of the chilled ready meals sector sheds light, is the concept of historical constructs of time. Changes in perceptions of time, particularly the perception of what constitutes as 'leisure' time and 'work' time, were central to the success of the recipe dishes in the 1970s. As social constructs of cookery shifted and women participated in the labour market in greater numbers, a reorganisation took place in constructs of time in British social history. It will be argued here that time is thus a social and cultural concept and whilst there are obviously a fixed number of hours in a day, and days in a year, personal and public perceptions of the elasticity of time and prioritisation of leisure, and indeed what constitutes 'leisure', are constructed at the level of the individual and on a day-to-day basis.

The scholarly debate in which this issue is situated has been approached from a wide range of disciplinary angles throughout the second half of the twentieth century, drawing upon sources such as diaries of factory workers, autobiographical material and oral histories. Until the Second World War, labour history had been predominantly concerned with the fight for a shorter working day and improved working conditions. After 1945 the nature of the fight between workers and employers shifted significantly, with demands for overtime and the right to work longer hours becoming a key bone of contention. E.P. Thompson's influential 1967 article outlined the rising consciousness of workers that time is money and the role of the work day in setting the rhythm of people's lives.<sup>449</sup> In John Rule's 2001 article on the British working class in the 1950s and 1960s he outlines the shift, which is

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<sup>449</sup> E.P. Thompson, 'Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism' in *Past and Present*, vol. 38, no. 1 (1967) p. 86.



often drawn on generational lines, in working-class identity from working to earn a living to ‘mass-producing to share in mass consumption’.<sup>450</sup> Rule’s observation of people working for a lifestyle, of putting in overtime to be able to afford to purchase new consumer items, is all the more striking for its longevity into the twenty-first century. In many ways these patterns of employment and consumption seem at odds with Keynes’ famous hypothesis from ‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren’. Keynes forecast a future where the de-skilling of jobs and rising standards of living meant that true ‘leisure’ was to be enjoyed by all members of society, where people ‘do not sell themselves for the means of life’.<sup>451</sup> This idea has been returned to recently in the work of the economic historian Robert Skidelsky, with ideas of economic satiability and a reorganisation and reprioritisation of what constitutes ‘leisure’ and leisure time.<sup>452</sup> The time-budget studies of economists and economic historians, particularly those which consider constructs of time alongside the diffusion of consumer goods by those such as Sue Bowden and Avner Offer, provide a useful means of conceiving of this shifting dynamic between work and leisure in the twentieth century and serve to marry these theories of how people organise and prioritise their time.

Bowden and Offer have studied the diffusion of consumer goods, broadly divided into those that are time-saving and increase the quantity of discretionary time and those that are time-using and enhance the perceived quality of discretionary

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<sup>450</sup> John Rule, ‘Time, affluence and private leisure: the British working class in the 1950s and 1960s’, *Labour History Review*, vol. 66, no. 2 (Summer, 2001) p. 223.

<sup>451</sup> Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren’, p. 368.

<sup>452</sup> Robert Skidelsky and Edward Skidelsky, *How much is enough? The love of money and the case for the good life* (London: Allen Lane, 2012).

time.<sup>453</sup> They found that time-using goods diffused much faster than time-saving goods and argued that this was dependent upon:

the marginal cost of discretionary time, and its marginal utility. Consumers have apparently given greater priority to enhancing the quality of discretionary time than to increasing its quantity. This reflects the uneven pace of technological change, which has found it easier to increase the attractions of leisure than to reduce the burden of housework.<sup>454</sup>

Parallels can be found with the work of John Rule, in that a premium has been placed upon the idea of improving and personalising ever decreasing amounts of discretionary, or leisure time, and working longer hours to be able to afford goods which offer the perception of enhancing the quality of this time.

This forms an important part of the social context in which the chilled ready meals market emerged as it is exactly this shift in how leisure time was viewed, and indeed what constitutes leisure, that Marks and Spencer was drawing upon in its food retail strategies. A key part of the way that the company, and other food retailers, talked about products which carried out increasing steps of food preparation was to frame cooking not as a leisure activity, but as a chore. In a 1981 article in *St Michael News* food merchandising manager Peter Stillwell declared that ‘we are taking away the work of preparation and cooking from customer’.<sup>455</sup> In 1983 the company announced that ‘the chore has been taken out of preparing the “Sunday” roast with

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<sup>453</sup> Bowden and Offer, ‘Household appliances and the use of time’, p. 728.

<sup>454</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 732.

<sup>455</sup> ‘Chicken goes oriental’, *St Michael News* (December, 1981) p. 1.

the launch this month of a trial heat-and-serve roast chicken meal'.<sup>456</sup> Marks and Spencer was actively attempting to capitalise upon shifting social and cultural classifications of leisure activities, with the company defining cookery as a 'chore' rather than an enjoyable activity. However, an interesting counterpoint to this idea arises when viewed through the lens of second-wave feminism, which emerged in the 1980s. In publicly labelling cooking a 'chore' was Marks and Spencer helping to absolve the feelings internalised by women who really did see cooking as a chore? Women who found the burden of the 'second shift' overwhelming; who were taking part in the labour force and taking care of their children; who measured themselves against the zeitgeist of 'superwoman' and found themselves lacking, or who just did not enjoy cooking.<sup>457</sup> Perhaps in this way chilled ready meals and, more broadly, prepared and convenience food products, served to assuage the potential for feelings of guilt experienced by working women and offered an escape from the domestic drudgery which enslaved the housewives of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*.<sup>458</sup>

The immediate success of the chilled ready meals sector in 1979, and its continuing popularity up to present day, capitalised on wider shifts in food skills and conceptions of cookery in Britain. The processed nature of these recipe dishes, with only the final heating of the dish required to be carried out by the consumer, meant that customers without basic cookery skills could enjoy relatively complex dishes. Using data from a report by the National Food Alliance / MORI (1993), food policy researchers Tim Lang and Martin Caraher have showed that whilst 93 per cent of

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<sup>456</sup> 'Chicken feed!', *St Michael News* (February, 1983) p. 11.

<sup>457</sup> Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung, *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon Books, 1990).

<sup>458</sup> Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (London: Penguin, 1965).

young people had the skills to play computer games, only 38 per cent classed themselves as having the necessary skills to cook a jacket potato in the oven.<sup>459</sup> Further to this, when a Good Food Foundation survey asked, in 1998, what constitutes a cookery skill, respondents answered as follows: making a sandwich 36 per cent; making toast 31 per cent; opening cereal boxes 20 per cent; cooking chips 11 per cent; cake mixes from a packet 9 per cent; cooking eggs 9 per cent; and cooking a pizza 7 per cent.<sup>460</sup> This represents two major trends in food skills in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century. The first is a deskilling in what was traditionally considered to be a 'food skill': baking, chopping, roasting etc. The second is an increase in the technological skills required to engage with new domestic technologies, particularly microwave ovens. It appears that Marks and Spencer was successful in tapping into this generational trend of a reduction in traditional food preparation skills and, at the same time, drawing upon ideas of convenience and previously discussed changes constructs of time, particularly in what was considered to constitute 'leisure' time. There are two additional elements of this debate which are worthy of further investigation in the future. The first is the extent to which the generational knowledge-transfer process through which skills are handed down from one generation to the next had shifted or ceased by the second half of the twentieth century. The second is the role of food education in Britain, particularly after the 1988 Educational Reform Act, and the changing place of domestic science on the curriculum, replaced instead by a move towards teaching

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<sup>459</sup> Tim Lang and Martin Caraher, 'Is There a Culinary Skills Transition?: Data and Debate from the UK about Changes in Cooking Culture?', *Journal of the Home Economics Institute of Australia*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2001) pp. 2 - 14.

<sup>460</sup> Lang and Caraher, 'Is There a Culinary Skills Transition?', pp. 2 - 14.

food technology in secondary schools.<sup>461</sup>

That the first chilled ready meals were ethnic dishes is highly significant. Launched in 1979, the chicken Kiev was an ‘exotic’ dish to the British palate and the subsequent products to market were also what would be considered as ‘ethnic’: Chinese dishes such as ‘Chinese chicken in mushroom’ in 1982 and Indian chicken korma and chicken tikka kebabs in 1983.<sup>462</sup> As established in chapter 1, the company perceived their role within the British food industry as a dynamic intermediary: translating and interpreting trends and innovations and then using this to educate its customers and thus take a role in shaping government policy and consumer behaviour. It was drawing upon trends in the British restaurant scene and making use of ‘exotic’ ingredients and tastes encountered by both waves of immigration and increasing access to foreign travel. As seen in chapter 5, the concept of ‘exotic’ food products was framed by a distinct sense of ‘otherness’ in the British market and, again, this gives further credence to the ideas of ‘national’ diets. An alternative rationale for using ‘ethnic’ recipes may also have been to draw upon the lack of familiarity of what these dishes were ‘supposed’ to taste like, and thus a product which was below the eating-quality normally expected by customers could be tolerated, and even enjoyed, due to a widespread ignorance of the original.

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<sup>461</sup> See *Education Reform Act 1988* (London: HMSO, 1988); Prue Leith, ‘Braising standards’, *The Times Higher*, 7<sup>th</sup> July 1997 [accessed online at [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/braising-standards/103753.article](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/features/braising-standards/103753.article) on 12<sup>th</sup> March 2015]; Sean Stitt, Margaret Jepson and Elaine Paulson-Box, ‘Taking the Cooking out of Food: Nutrition & the National Curriculum’, *Nutrition and Health*, vol. 10, no. 2 (January, 1995) pp. 155 - 164.

<sup>462</sup> ‘Chop-chop! It’s a St Michael take away’, *St Michael News* (September, 1982) p. 3; ‘Indian Flavour Launch’, *St Michael News* (February, 1983) p. 11.

These 'exotic' tastes were initially met with resistance by the senior leadership team of the company. Cathy Chapman recalled that weeks before the launch of the chicken Kiev in 1979, she was asked to reduce the garlic flavour of the dish:

I can remember the executive of the group I was in at the time saying 'you can't put garlic in it. Nobody likes garlic'. And fighting that to the very end, until about 6 weeks before the launch and refusing to take the garlic out, for which I am quite thankful now. But that is really how new it was at the time. There were still quite a lot of reservations about whether they did or didn't like garlic.<sup>463</sup>

Chapman indicated that at the point of launching these products, food retailers were still unsure about the willingness amongst the British public to adopt these new tastes into the nation's diet. It is therefore apparent that the company perceived of itself as taking on the role of educating customers' palates in this instance. Within the company's corporate material there is considerable evidence of this perception, with ideas of their products as offering ethnic authenticity featuring heavily. A particularly apt example of this is a video produced by Marks and Spencer in 1995, which contained a section on the company's work on chilled ready meals. In a section entitled 'A Quest for Authenticity', an interview with the company's Indian food consultant is shown alongside footage of the product range.<sup>464</sup> To a background of evidently 'Indian'-inspired music, the voice over describes a product as 'sweet and sour chicken. Authentically cooked: Marks and Spencer style'.<sup>465</sup> The video explains the use of ingredients in the chilled ready meals as being 'so typical of genuine ethnic cooking' and how one dish uses an 'innovative design of the Balti

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<sup>463</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side B.

<sup>464</sup> MSCA, P10/1/571, 'Food Model Stores 1995 Parts 1 & 2', VHS (1995).

<sup>465</sup> 'Food Model Stores 1995', 08:35.

style bowl to enhance the authentic style'.<sup>466</sup> Promoting this idea of chilled ready meals as offering ethnic authenticity may be seen as a way of differentiating the company within the market: attempting to situate itself within the minds of consumers as the place to buy genuine, restaurant-quality recipe dishes. An earlier example of this can be found in *St Michael News* in 1984, which featured the following letter from a customer:

Caramba! Jose Samperio from Mexico had given up hope of ever finding a tasty Chile con carne in Britain – until he tried the M&S version. Jose, who is studying for a master's degree at Queen Elizabeth College, London, said 'When I tried it, it was really tasty and well cooked - "Mexican style". I had tried lots of others but they were not as tasty. I must congratulate you' he added.<sup>467</sup>

The creation of the chilled ready meals sector, therefore, represents a moment in time where British food retailers were beginning to distinguish themselves not just as places to buy raw ingredients, but as places to purchase whole meals which rivalled both home cooking and the quality of restaurants. They were thus seeking to position themselves as the sole channel through which to consume food.

Furthermore, Marks and Spencer evidently viewed the relationship between travel and changes in the demands of their food customers as being of great importance. In another video produced by the company and designed to be shown to employees as a method of staff training, it was explained that:

Now the world is getting smaller all the time and our customers are increasingly travelling and experiencing all corners of the globe, lucky old things. Now this

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<sup>466</sup> 'Food Model Stores 1995', 10:12 and 11:40.

<sup>467</sup> *St Michael News* (March, 1984).

means customer's tastes are changing and they are more interested in different cuisines. So our team of product developers have travelled around the orient in particular to bring back classic and distinct flavours.<sup>468</sup>

Once again, the company can be seen as attempting to position itself as a dynamic intermediary in increasingly global food supply chains: mediating cultural differences between British consumers and international suppliers. It was responding to changes in consumer demands for new tastes and flavours and convenience and translating these into 'ethnic' recipes into the British culinary vernacular.

To return to Warde's sociological antinomies of taste, it can be understood that chilled ready meals served as an example of a food stuff which appeared to satisfy the criteria of both care and convenience. If the use of 'ethnic' recipes in these dishes tapped into waves of immigration and foreign travel and was seen as offering culinary authenticity and food that was of restaurant quality, then the pre-processing and use of innovative packaging techniques satisfied the consumer demand for convenient food products. Chapman has recalled that in years before the launch of the chicken Kiev, there was an emerging pattern of food consumption which placed convenience of utmost importance:

There was a huge trend emerging for the convenience and for adding value and making things taste different. Plus you did have the fast food restaurants in England at that time. And so you knew that there was a trend towards snacking

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<sup>468</sup> MSCA, P10/1/657, 'Bite into a taste of Marks & Spencer. Phase 2', VHS (undated) 03:55.



food, crispy food, that kind of thing. And it was a natural extension. Sometimes these things feel so natural you actually forget where they sort of come from.<sup>469</sup>

Again, it is evident that the company was drawing upon and taking influence from British culinary cultures of eating outside of the home, then bringing this into the homes of their customers. It was attempting to take the experiences of food that people were having in restaurants and fast food establishments and translating them into the context of the domestic kitchen. Marks and Spencer was responding directly to consumer demands, using innovative retail practices to meet these, and then taking a role in shaping consumer behaviour.

The primary aim of this case study has been to exemplify the utility of using the relationship between a food retailer and their customers a lens through which to explore British social history. By focussing on one sector, it is possible to gain a unique and valuable insight into the complicated web of interconnected factors which have existed historically within the British food system. Central to the main themes of this thesis, this chapter shows in detail an example of Marks and Spencer responding to changes in consumer demand and developing innovative and cutting-edge retail practices. The company was then able to use its influence in the industry and relationship with suppliers to drive forward a food retail strategy which helped to shape consumer behaviour and, crucially, made sound commercial sense. Cathy Chapman summarised this succinctly in the oral history interview given as part of the Food: From Source to Sales point programme when she explained:

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<sup>469</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

The customer wanted breast meat. Boneless, white meat, that's what they wanted so you had to give it to them. You charge a premium for that but they still pay for it ... I think you should do two things. I think you should a) give them what they want but b) encourage them to be more adventurous and try things that they wouldn't ordinarily have tried.<sup>470</sup>

This case study, therefore, sheds light on how the relationship between British food retailers and their customers functioned at this particular moment in time and how influence and power shifted throughout the food system in the UK. The key motivation for Marks and Spencer was to make the greatest possible profit on their products, and in this respect the creation of the chilled ready meals sector can be viewed as a real commercial success for the company. Within five years, it had contributed significantly to the way in which a substantial part of the population consumed food. This was much trumpeted in the company's financial results for 1983/4. Food sales had increased by 17.4 per cent on the previous year, reaching £1022m (out of a total £2629.9m). The report said that 'the star turn this year is the new recipe dish department where freshness, excellent eating quality and attractive presentation have proved a winning combination'.<sup>471</sup>

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<sup>470</sup> Cathy Chapman, oral history interview, F15666, tape 2, side A.

<sup>471</sup> 'Marks & Spencer UK results 1983/4', *St Michael News* (May, 1984) p. 8.

## Conclusion

The starting point for this thesis was to find an approach for using the material held in the Marks and Spencer archive, which had previously been analysed only in the framework of traditional business and retail history and commissioned works, in order to explore the social history of food consumption. It has been shown that by focussing on a single retailer and exploring the relationship it had with its customers, it is possible to begin to unpack what Fine and Leopold described as the ‘bewildering array of factors’ which affected the experience of consumers in the twentieth century.<sup>472</sup> The retailer-consumer interface was the point at which the histories of supply and production interacted with histories of consumption and were, in turn, shaped by the history of food retailing. In allowing this interface to drive the analysis of the wide variety of primary material and multi-disciplinary scholarship, this thesis has begun to shed light on the issues and themes which characterised the retail and consumption of food between the 1950s and 1980s. Whilst much of the historiography on consumption is preoccupied with what Jessen and Langer have termed ‘revolutionary upheavals’, the material available in the company’s archives suggests that it was continuity, rather than change, which most strongly characterised the experiences of Marks and Spencer and their customers during this period.<sup>473</sup> It indicates that there were several key developments in both its food retailing strategies and in the behaviour of consumers. These included the emergence of convenience as a major theme in both consumer demand and retail practices by the end of the 1970s and the evolution in social constructions of the concept of cleanliness, as exemplified in chapter 4’s discussion of Marks and

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<sup>472</sup> Fine and Leopold, *The World of Consumption*, pp. 167 - 168.

<sup>473</sup> Jessen and Langer, p.3.

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Spencer's hygienic food practices. However, what was most striking about the social history of food when viewed through this lens was the continuity of a set of core principles which shaped both consumer demand and the food retailing practices of Marks and Spencer: quality, value for money and choice.

Most significantly, this thesis has engaged critically with the primary material from the company archive, situating it within its wider context to find that Marks and Spencer's focus on the progressive dimensions of advances in food technology allowed it to create a new relationship with its customers. This enabled the company to successfully navigate and, to a certain extent, shape consumer preferences. Marks and Spencer was effective in developing a powerful form of communication with customers about what the company meant and stood for using alternative channels such as political interventions about consumer protection, hygiene and food regulations. The company's focus on technological advances was then applied to its food retail operations through a series of developments, beginning with food hygiene in the 1940s. It then utilised this emphasis on the development of food technologies to increase the range and quality of the products offered to consumers and this approach then culminated with the launch of the pre-packaged ready meal in 1979, which in many ways became a mainstay of the company ever since. This investigation into the interface between Marks and Spencer and its customers has therefore facilitated an exploration of the process by which food technology came to permeate the daily lives of consumers by the latter decades of the twentieth century and the role of retailers within this.

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It has shown how the case study of Marks and Spencer resonates with wider themes and issues in modern British history. Most notably, the company's creation of a language of customer relations which transcended class allowed it to operate at a level that straddled the worlds of high and low culture and appeal to consumers across class divides. After the Second World War the democratic culture to which Marks and Spencer directly appealed became increasingly future-oriented and associated with both a moment of modernity, encapsulated by the Festival of Britain in 1951, and more long-term shifts towards the permeation of technology into everyday life. The centrality of progressive technologies to Marks and Spencer's food retailing operations therefore allowed the company to tap into the 'white heat' of the scientific revolution identified by Harold Wilson at the Labour party conference in October 1963. Whilst Wilson called for the nation's politicians and businesses to 'be ready to think and to speak in the language of our scientific age', Marks and Spencer had already made this a central tenant of their retailing strategy.<sup>474</sup>

The first three chapters of the thesis explored the complexities of the relationship between Marks and Spencer and their customers and contextualised this within the wider histories of multiple retailing and consumption. The role of Marks and Spencer in the wider history of food retail and consumption was also considered, where it was found that the company played an important role in the social history of food in Britain between 1950 and 1980. It acted as a dynamic intermediary and was involved in an ongoing process of negotiating between the supply-push of its relationship with suppliers and the demand-pull of its relationship with consumers.

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<sup>474</sup> 'Mr Wilson's Four Points in Harnessing Science', *The Times*, 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1963, p. 16.

## Conclusion

Through its engagement with industry and government, the company perceived of itself as operating at the very forefront of innovations in food retail and consumer protections. This was evidenced by an exploration of the work of food technologist Nathan Goldenberg with the FACC, Simon Marks' contributions to the House of Lords debate on the Molony Committee report and the finding that the company's was the first British retailer to introduce best before dates, predating legislation by some 27 years. The extent to which food suppliers and other food retailers saw Marks and Spencer as playing a leading role in these developments is yet to be explored. However press coverage of the issue of using cyclamates in food in the 1960s suggested that the company had an influential role in British food industry, as one unnamed retailer was quoted as saying: 'When Marks and Spencer cough, we all go and have our chests examined'.<sup>475</sup> The company was directly investing in food development research and negotiating relationships with its suppliers which allowed it to demand exacting standards and to respond quickly to changes in the behaviour of consumers. These strategies helped to establish the company's status as a reputable and trustworthy retailer, a reputation which it was able to employ in driving forward improvements in what it perceived as important consumer issues and those which, crucially, made sound commercial sense in the long-term. The latter half of the thesis then went on to investigate how the relationship between Marks and Spencer was negotiated within the context of specific issues, in order to assess changes and continuities across the period. Further justification of the influential role the company played in the history of food retail and consumption between 1950 and 1980 was found in examinations of the company's hygienic practices, its work in

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<sup>475</sup> 'Cyclamates and Mr Cube', *Guardian*, 20<sup>th</sup> August 1968, p. 6.

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bringing new products to market and the creation of the chilled ready meals sector in 1979.

The relationship between the company and its customers has been the lens through which this thesis has engaged with relevant primary and secondary material.

However, the challenges and limitations of using a business archive to explore the themes and issues raised in the social history of food must be borne in mind. There are several significant areas of consumer history which were not being discussed by the company. These include changes in the class structure of British society, the gendered nature of food consumption and the increasing politicisation of consumers and the act of consumption. The longevity of the culture in which Marks and Spencer conceived of its customers as 'housewives' raises issues about the usefulness of using retail history sources to explore the social history of consumption. The company's experience appears to be at odds with wider shifts towards a gender-neutral definition of consumers in British social history. Similarly, the idea of consumption as an increasingly politicised act cannot be evidenced by the material in the company's archive.

Thus, whilst the material upon which the discussions have drawn has been rooted first and foremost in the company's archive, an extensive range of primary and secondary material has also been engaged with in order to contextualise the specific experience of Marks and Spencer. This has generated a careful and considered understanding of both the complex relationship between the company and its customers and of the wider histories of retail and consumption. The methodological approach has been similar to the one used by Nancy Cox in her research on the

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history of tradesmen and shopkeepers, where she drew upon a wide variety of primary material in order to understand the relationship between individual shopkeepers and their customers.<sup>476</sup> However, it has been possible to expand upon Cox's approach in this investigation due to the richness of material available for historians of the twentieth century. The experience of Marks and Spencer has, as far as possible, been situated within the history of multiple retailing in Britain. Future opportunities for comparative studies have been flagged where appropriate. Contemporary newspaper reports have been considered alongside parliamentary sources, such as House of Lords debates, oral histories and audio-visual material. This has enabled the retailing practices of Marks and Spencer to be contextualised within wider developments in British social history, such as the 'moment of modernity' encapsulated by the Festival of Britain in 1951.

The thesis has raised a number of questions, some of which it has not been possible to answer definitively. It has been seen that at various points in the company's history, Marks and Spencer adapted its retailing strategies to respond directly to changes in consumer behaviour. The case study of chilled ready meals in chapter 6 showed how the company was able to utilise its food retail practices and relationship with suppliers in order to capitalise on changes occurring in British society in the 1970s and create food products which met consumer demands for convenience. At other times, the company has been seen to have positioned itself at the forefront of changes in British food policy and played an instrumental role in shaping the behaviour of consumers. This was demonstrated in its work on improving the quality of the food products sold in Marks and Spencer stores and in driving forward

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<sup>476</sup> Cox, *The Complete Tradesman*.



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developments in hygienic food retail practices. One of the key examples used to evidence this assertion was the company's introduction of best before dates in the 1950s.

Ultimately, it has been argued that Marks and Spencer's focus on the development of food technologies allowed the company to forge a new relationship with its customers. It engaged with alternative channels of communication using a language of customer relations which allowed it to transcend class boundaries and tap into a common culture which was increasingly future-oriented and technology driven. It has been demonstrated that this technological approach then found its way into the company's product range. By focussing in on a series of innovations in Marks and Spencer's retail history and exploring these through the consumer-retailer interface, it has been possible to trace the penetration of technological modernity into the everyday lives of British consumers by 1980. However, the more recent history of the relationship between the company's practices and consumer demands is yet to be explored and it remains to be seen whether these key principles were subject to change or began erode in the 1980s. In the final chairman's review of the period, delivered by Marcus Sieff in 1980, Sieff declared: 'What was appropriate for the sixties and seventies will not do for the 1980s.'<sup>477</sup> Thus, a valuable extension of this study would be an investigation into how Marks and Spencer's food retail practices changed in the social, political and economic context of the 1980s and what effect this had on the company's relationship with consumers.

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<sup>477</sup> *Reports and Accounts*, 31<sup>st</sup> March 1978, p. 7.

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