

EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY SHOPS AND THE LUXURY TRADE

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Looking back on a visit to Bath as a nine-year-old in 1788, one Victorian woman retained vivid memories of 'the beauty of the shops, which I was never tired of looking at! I could not conceive how it was possible to invent all the wants, which here were professed to be supplied.' Similar admiring comments can be found throughout the period – from travellers in the 1720s who enthused over the handsome shops 'filled with every thing that contributes to Pleasure' and hugely patronised 'by the great resort of nobility & Gentry to this place', down to the early nineteenth century and Louis Simond's appreciation of the 'Multitude of splendid shops, full of all that wealth and luxury can desire, arranged with all the arts of seduction'.¹

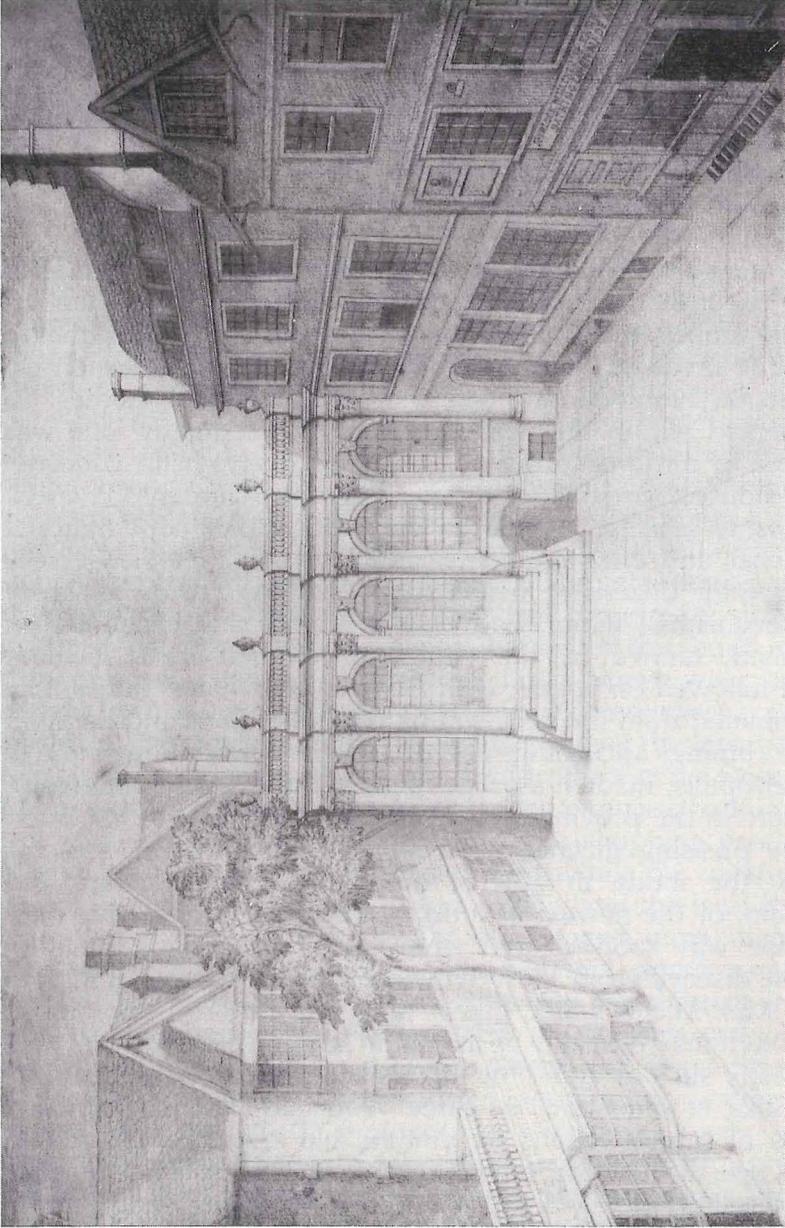
Apart from shops, which themselves ranged from the humblest booths to fashion boutiques and embryonic high-street stores, Bath displayed the whole gamut of retailing activity. Costermongers and other street traders cried their wares about the city peddling fruit, vegetables, fish, milk, muffins, haberdashery goods, cheap prints, ballads and pamphlets. Colliers accompanied by their ill-used beasts of burden delivered coal from door to door. The twice-a-year Bath fairs, it is true, were dwindling in importance (superseded in part by the big August fair on Lansdown), but the regular food market maintained and even enhanced its reputation for the variety, quality, and general inexpensiveness of the produce on sale. Gradually the rather casual agglomeration of stalls cluttering the Marketplace on two or three days a week turned into a properly planned, off-street market. A major improvement of the shambles area around 1745 was followed in the 1760s by the formal laying-out of stalls for the

market gardeners, and a decade later by a full-scale reorganisation associated with the building of the new Guildhall. Administered directly by the Corporation through a system of bailiffs, inspectors, licensing procedures, and regulations to limit fraud and profiteering, the Bath market eventually came to be regarded as a model of its kind: 'its excellent order and abundance surpasses any thing in London, and is [as] surprising a sight as any in the place'.²

But it was the permanent shops that most impressed, and in particular the ones specialising in products of a luxury or semi-luxury nature. Many other towns could match Bath in butchers and bakers, cheesemongers and grocers, apothecaries, chandlers, ironmongers and braziers, common drapers, hatters and glovers, shoemakers, stationers, and purveyors of fairly basic commodities in general. Not only that, in urban centres all over the country, wherever the gentry and affluent middle classes congregated in sufficient numbers, more exclusive shops were springing up to meet the demand for high-status goods and services, the marks of success and sophisticated taste in a richly competitive society. Bath's pre-eminence lay in the sheer concentrated choice it offered, in its supreme fashion-consciousness, in the temptations it could place in the way of a spa clientèle eager for any novelty and diversion in the daily routine, and above all in the very character and aspirations of those that frequented the resort. Perhaps only the shops of London's West End, so dazzling to foreign tourists, outshone the later eighteenth-century emporia of Bath.

A small book published early in the century by a Dutch physician living in London furnishes as helpful an explanation as any for this achievement. Bernard Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees* (1714), provocatively subtitled 'Private Vices, Publick Benefits', argued that the springs of economic prosperity were what traditional morality condemned as human weaknesses – self-indulgence, vanity, envy, the urge to keep up with the Joneses. Prodigality was in fact a 'Noble Sin', while Luxury

Employ'd a Million of the Poor,
 And odious Pride a Million more.
 Envy it self, and Vanity
 Were Ministers of Industry;
 Their darling Folly, Fickleness



1 Plumbago drawing attributed to Benjamin Morris, c. 1760, showing the prime shopping site in front of the Pump Room. On the left Elizabeth Taylor, jeweller; on the right Jane Spurlock, milliner. (Courtesy Royal National Hospital for Rheumatic Diseases)

In Diet, Furniture, and Dress,
That strange ridic'ulous Vice, was made
The very Wheel, that turn'd the Trade.

In other words the buoyant national economy of post-Restoration England stemmed from the competitive pursuit of status and gratification by individual citizens as expressed in habits of conspicuous consumption. And on this analysis one of the chief beneficiaries was Bath.³

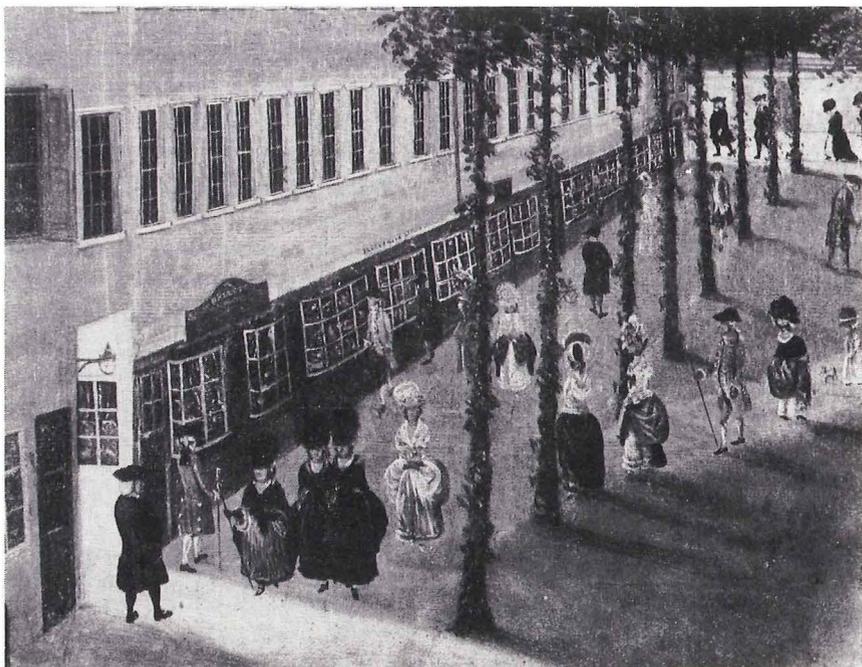
The mere act of holidaying at Bath (as opposed to visiting for purely medical reasons) had symbolic value in itself, demonstrating publicly that one had the leisure and the wherewithal to do so. It involved a considerable outlay on travel expenses, servants, accommodation, food and drink, and good clothes. To be accepted within the magic circle of 'the company' one was expected to conform to the rules: to subscribe to balls, concerts, coffee houses, circulating libraries, pleasure gardens, chapels, charities; to socialise, appear on the public walks, cut a figure at assemblies and entertainments, and – as a matter of course – patronise the dozens of stylish shops that were ready to satisfy every acquisitive whim. Bath was *à la mode* and consumerism flourished, fanned by the winds of commercialised fashion. Vogue followed on vogue, with news of every latest fad rapidly disseminated from the taste-setting centres of Paris and London. All the comings and goings at Bath, and its constant open line to the metropolis, made it a prime focus of information and gossip. Nowhere in the provinces could be better attuned to the *dernier cri*, the pressing dictates of fashion, whether in the season's fabrics, the mode in gowns, innovations in silverware and porcelain, or the newest flavours in syllabubs. Out-of-date merchandise was soon cleared from the shop shelves, as John Penrose discovered in 1767: 'we went to every Mercer in Bath to match Mrs. Michel's Silk, but in vain. The Pattern is too old for Bath, but it may probably be matcht in London. The Mercers here are mostly such as come for the Season, and are supplied only with Silks of one, two, or three years old Patterns.'⁴ Indeed repeats of fabrics barely six months old could be difficult to obtain, for the leading mercers, drapers and milliners usually tried to sell off old stock at the end of each spring or autumn to make room for the forthcoming season's designs.

As the city expanded, so did its commercial core. Until 1700 it

seems that the majority of traders aligned themselves along the old north-south routeway through Bath (with its kink in Cheap Street) or encroached into Abbey Churchyard or the ground once occupied by St Mary at Stalls. Over the next three decades a succession of retailers set up in business on the east side of the city, attracted to that quarter by the steady improvements to the Gravel Walks (now a favourite open-air meeting place of the visiting company), by the building of Harrison's assembly rooms in 1708 (soon embellished with a riverside garden), and eventually by the creation of a second suite of rooms, Lindsey's, almost opposite the first. A traffic-free pavement lined with shops, coffee-houses, public rooms and other attractions now stretched from Terrace Walk, along the south and west sides of the Gravel Walks, through Wade's Passage – completed by 1723 or earlier, and into the Abbey Churchyard and another group of shops around the Pump Room. The great concentration of luxury tradesmen remained in this zone until the 1760s when a significant new phase of shopping development began with the intrusion of genteel retailing into Milsom Street, the recently-made residential link between lower Bath and the rapidly spreading upper town. The commercial possibilities of this busy axis of communication becoming obvious, Bond Street with its two narrow islands of shops (one of them since demolished) was soon adding to the range of quality merchandising at the lower end of Milsom Street. Similar shops appeared in the George Street area to the north, together with a row of small premises built into the side of the Upper Assembly Rooms and a shopping precinct in Margaret Buildings off Brock Street. Meanwhile the construction of Pulteney Bridge and its approach roads, and the facelift given to the Marketplace in the 1770s, encouraged more high-class salesmen into this traditional retailing district, which continued well beyond the now-raised North gate into Broad Street and the artisan neighbourhood of Walcot Street. On the west and south of the city, around Kingsmead, Avon Street and Horse Street for example, there were cheaper shops serving the poorer community and not much frequented by visitors – even if the Penroses did penetrate into Avon Street on one occasion and risk the purchase of second-hand silks at a bargain price. The final stage of eighteenth-century shopping development was reached during the inner-city renewal of the 1790s. Many long-standing

businesses in Cheap Street, Abbey Churchyard and Stall Street were affected, some re-modelled, others pulled down, while a double row of completely new shops came into being with the laying out of colonnaded Bath Street. The latter were quickly taken over by a haberdasher, linen draper, hatter, china- and glassman, circulating-library keeper, and other select enough occupants, though an ironmonger and a fishmonger had moved in by the turn of the century. Bath Street perhaps found itself too close to the mixed shopping of Stall Street to be able to preserve the exclusive air of Bond Street, say, or Abbey Churchyard.

For two thirds of the century many shops signalled their presence with elaborate street signs bearing some device like a star or fleur-de-lys or, more commonly, an emblem of their trade (the Golden Canister, the Ring and Pearl, the Buck and Breeches, the Two Lappets and Three Cards of Lace). But the signs creaked and dripped in the wind and rain, and offended the modernising eye with their clutter; so in 1766, following London's example, they were statutorily banned, leaving the narrow streets suddenly bereft. Signboards fastened flat against the building took their place, often with no more than the simple name and occupation of the shopkeeper in neat gilt lettering. The most noticeable external feature of a shop then became its extra-large street-level windows. By about 1730 bow fronts were appearing in Bath. They both let in more light and provided better display space. From this point on window-dressing assumed a steadily greater importance, eye-catching articles being positioned for maximum effect and allure. The spectacle of some metropolitan West End shops in the later eighteenth century seems to have been almost hypnotic, and Bath did not lag much behind with its glittering jewellers' and toymen, mouth-watering confectioners', and fabric shops exhibiting brilliantly patterned silks and cottons draped the whole height of the windows. Even so, as one Milsom Street draper lamented in 1787, such was the variety of their stock a window display could not do it justice.⁵ The trouble with deliberate visual enticement was that it also tempted thieves who might return under cover of darkness to break shutters and glass in order to get at the goods. Luxury shops, especially goldsmiths' and watchmakers', were particularly vulnerable. In 1771 a boy was sentenced to transportation for stealing silver buckles and buttons from a glass case outside a goldsmith and toyman's shop



2 Shops in Orange Grove from an anonymous oil painting, c. 1780. The shop with the obvious signboard belonged to Edward Hallett, hosier and hatter, from 1775, when he took over from the toyman Lewis Bull, until 1780.

in the Marketplace,⁶ while snatches of coveted items like watches were not infrequent.

Shop interiors relied on light from the windows in daytime and candles and oil-lamps once it grew dark. They were well, sometimes sumptuously, equipped with counters (perhaps in mahogany), shelves, cabinets and drawers, showcases, boxes and canisters, cash-tills, scales and measures, supplies of wrapping paper, and – in the case of the odd large-scale bookseller or toyman – daily newspapers (and doubtless chairs) for the use of customers. Although there might be some show of stock inside the shop, the majority of commodities had to be asked for; and while the idea of branded goods took hold with certain perfumery products and patent medicines, most other purchases had first to be weighed out, sorted, measured, cut to size, and packed on the spot. In addition to ordinary scales shops needed delicate bal-

ances to check the badly debased gold and silver coinage. Counterfeit and foreign coins circulated all too freely, given the perennial shortage of small change, and in time a few Bath shops issued their own trade tokens.

Keeping a business solvent was no simple matter in the eighteenth century. Sound credit was crucial. It facilitated the somewhat cumbersome money transactions, primarily using bills of exchange, among networks of suppliers, wholesalers, retailers and the as yet rudimentary banks. It sustained a shopkeeper's reputation for honest dealing when so many sale items were non-standardised and could be judged only through experience. It helped him obtain generous repayment terms from manufacturers and middlemen, often of six months and more. On the other hand he would be expected to allow his more substantial and creditworthy clients a long period of grace before presenting his bill. In a place like Bath which had so many short-stay visitors this could be a risky procedure: hence the emerging practice of mercers, drapers, haberdashers and others who required cash at the time of purchase – selling 'for ready money' as it was styled. What is also worth noting is that by the 1740s some dealers had already abandoned the time-honoured custom of allowing articles to be 'cheapened' or haggled over, instituting a fixed-price system instead. A good example was the firm of Peter and James Ferry, London silk weavers, whose Bath shop seems to have been their major outlet for over twenty years. In 1744 their advertisement for brocaded and patterned silks and velvets included the rider: 'N.B. the Lowest Price will be fix'd on each Piece, without any Abatement'.⁷ This was a much earlier date than the ticketing of merchandise is normally reckoned to have started.

Shopping activity fluctuated enormously between high and low season. At first visitors came to Bath principally in the summer months because the roads to it were less difficult then, and following medical advice on bathing; in due course an autumn and then a double autumn-spring season evolved, with summer becoming the slackest period of the whole year. At the season's peak shopkeepers, assistants, apprentices, backroom employees, and all the independent trades (including tailors and dressmakers) laboured long, exhausting hours to fulfil the demand and make commercial hay while the sun shone. All retailers had to defer to their wealthier customers, and the more

the shop looked to patronage from the rich, the greater the expected obsequiousness and the attention required to degrees of precedence. As Defoe once put it: 'A tradesman behind his counter must have no flesh and blood about him; no passions; no resentment . . .'.⁸ A genteel tradesman too had to be sprucely turned out, dressed and periwigged in the mode, and effusively polite. Thus a silk mercer, according to one contemporary authority, 'must have a great deal of the *Frenchman* in his Manners, as well as a large Parcel of *French Goods* in his Shop', while as for the gold- and silver-laceman:

He ought to speak fluently, though not elegantly, to entertain the Ladies; and to be Master of the handsome Bow and Cringe; should be able to hand a Lady to and from her Coach politely, without being seized with the Palpitation of the Heart at the Touch of a delicate Hand, a well-turned and much exposed Limb, or a handsome Face: But, above all, he must have Confidence to refuse his Goods in a handsome Manner to the extravagant Beau who never pays, and Patience as well as Stock to bear the Delays of the sharpening Peer, who pays but seldom.⁹

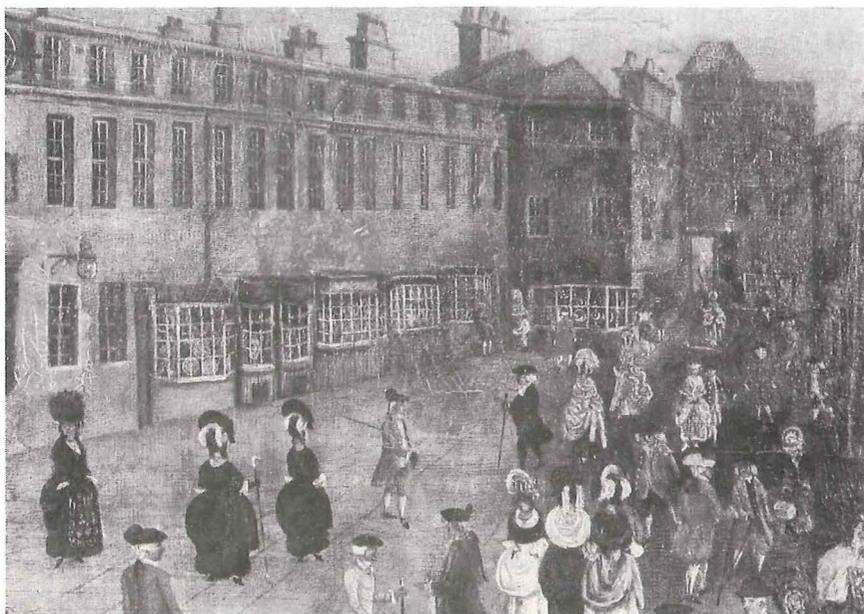
Such, one assumes, were Leonard Coward father and son, the eminent Stall Street lacemen whose monument is in the Abbey Church and who accumulated a small fortune.

The periodic slack season provided an opportunity for stock-checking and fresh buying in. It was then that shopkeepers in the fashion line would travel up to London to inspect the new modes and do the rounds of their agents and suppliers, or visit the manufacturing centres of the Midlands and North. For some it was an annual pilgrimage, essential if they were to keep abreast of the latest patterns and products. Bath dressmakers, milliners, staymakers and the like often felt it necessary to check metropolitan styles at least twice a year. The cachet of Paris and London were so great that shops able to boast of these connections did so, especially once the old trade restrictions on outsiders had finally broken down. Up to the mid-eighteenth century the Corporation tried half-heartedly to enforce the old rules by which all the city's traders and craftsmen must be freemen of Bath, and indeed in 1752 the guilds or companies of bakers, grocers and chandlers, mercers and drapers, and the rest, were briefly revived. Guild regulations, however, never wholly succeeded in preventing

interlopers either settling in the city or putting up shop for the season, and from the late 1750s it became almost a free-for-all. Temporary traders were much resented all the same, being exempt from parish rates and many of the overheads paid by resident retailers. Furthermore their arrival with cut-price manufactures and fabrics straight off the looms simply increased competition in an already ruthless market.

All manner of promotional techniques were employed in the struggle for economic advantage: handbills, catalogues, special offers, weekly novelties, discounts, reduced-price sales and auctions, customer flattery, puffing advertisements in the local press – occasionally allied to public repudiation of the claims of rivals. In the late 1780s and 1790s Richard Prynne, a large-scale linen draper in the Marketplace, proved himself a master of publicity, forever drawing attention to special lines in shawls, straw bonnets, fancy dresses, Witney blankets, and dress and furnishing materials galore. At Christmas he hinted at charitable purchases for the poor; in early summer he suggested Whitsuntide gifts; always, he declared, 'SOMETHING NEW'. He held what he called 'opposition sales' to undercut competitors, bragged about the unprecedented demand for goods and his rapid turnover, and assailed the public with items 'if possible more *extraordinary* than those with which they have already been *astonished*'. This was a boom era for the domestic consumption of cottons now that legal restraints had been lifted on their manufacture and use, and Prynne it seems had buyers on his behalf stationed in the manufacturing districts of Lancashire and the Clyde. Yet he was ready as well to experiment with articles outside his usual range such as shoes, cashing in on the market for ready-made footwear in characteristic vein:

Pray, Mr. Prynne, let me look at your *Cheap Shoes*? – Yes Ma'am – Well, they are astonishingly cheap, and appear as well-made as those I order of Mr. — the Shoe-maker, and pay so much more for! How is it possible you can sell them at the price, – Why, Madam, the Person I have them from resides in London, where he has opportunities of purchasing the materials on very low terms for *Ready Money* – is content with a *small profit*, so am I – from this day's very rapid sale I am now unsorted; but on Saturday Morning next at eleven, a greater variety will be opened for your and for the public's inspection – also Cheap Gloves, Muslins, Dimities, black and white



- 3 Shops in Terrace Walk from an anonymous oil painting, *c.* 1780. At the end Lewis Bull appears to be displaying silver plate as he continues selling off his former toyman's stock at the circulating library.

Lace, Sattins, Modes, Persians, Gauzes, & Ribbons; in short an universal assortment of Linen-Drapery, Mercery, Hosiery, Haberdashery, &c.¹⁰

But whereas these aggressive self-promotional tactics enabled Prynne to weather the trade crisis of the mid-1790s, his former partner at the 'Bengal Warehouse', William Collins, with whom his cut-price policy had evolved, succumbed to the conditions and was proclaimed a bankrupt in 1797. As the Bath evidence makes only too clear, bankruptcy was an occupational hazard of eighteenth-century shopkeeping, with drapers perhaps disproportionately at risk.¹¹

Success in any fashion-related business depended on luck as well as shrewd judgment and enterprise. A niche in the capricious luxury market could never be absolutely secure. An abrupt change in the mode (as for instance when the use of shoe-strings displaced shoe buckles in 1791) could dislocate an entire Black

Country manufacture; the announcement of a Court mourning might throw the Spitalfields silk industry quite out of gear. Different shops won or lost accordingly. The death of George II in 1760 sparked off an immediate run on the Bath drapers for black crapes and bombazines, the traditional mourning fabrics. Mrs Delany reported that one shop disposed of 1500 yards of crape on a single Sunday evening¹² – when presumably it had special dispensation to open (Sabbath sales otherwise being legally confined to milk and mackerel, both highly perishable). On the other hand local and visiting mercers must have suffered a corresponding drop in sales, especially of patterned silks, their chief standby.

Government taxation policy likewise tended to have random effects. To pay for a succession of costly wars, taxes and excise duties were at different times levied on various textile materials, leather, hats and hatters, gloves and glovers, sundry foodstuffs, wines and spirits, household plate, candles, clocks and watches, and hair powder.¹³ Less discriminatory but still serious for shops operating at the margin of profitability were taxes on windows, advertisements, and worst of all shops themselves. William Pitt's detested Shop Tax, imposed in 1785, assessed premises by their rateable value and then taxed them pro rata. The day it came into force retailers in many towns signalled their protest by shutting up shop, but not in Bath since most traders there could ill spare a day –

there being scarce enough in the year to keep their shops open on, to enable them to pay the accumulated burthens imposed on them. However, several shewed their contempt so far as to hang their doors and windows with mourning crape, scarfs, &c. [and] others covered their counters with velvet palls, and hung weeping willows and other emblems of woe, with inscriptions expressive of their indignation against the tax, and a once favourite minister. *No Pitt, no Partial Tax*, and other such sentences, were chalked up in every part of the city.¹⁴

Backed by the Corporation and the two city M.P.s who doubtless recognised the vital role that retailing played in Bath's economy, the shopkeepers petitioned and lobbied Parliament for several years to get the tax repealed. In one Commons debate the opposition leader, Charles James Fox, clearly well briefed, cited the instances of two Bath poulterers and three silversmiths as

proof of the measure's unfairness. The local press quoted similar cases. When after four stubborn years Pitt finally gave in to nation-wide pressure, for Bath it came as a particular relief.

Poulterers as well as silversmiths could benefit from the moneyed visitors and well-heeled resident gentry, not merely through increased turnover but by supplying them with produce of a more *recherché* and expensive character. The same was true of butchers (who astonished Penrose with their fine language and chocolate drinking) and fishmongers and pastrycooks. A few such establishments had a more than local fame, such as the poulterer's in Wade's Passage run for several generations by the Gifford and Hemmings families, the fishmonger's on the west side of High Street where the Hancocks had an enormous range of fish and sea foods on offer, or the pastrycooks Charles Gill, also on a prime site in Wade's Passage, and Molland at the foot of Milsom Street. The names of both pastrycooks turn up in contemporary novels and verse, with Christopher Anstey strong in his claims for the former:

Of all the cooks the world can boast,
 However great their skill,
 To bake or fry, to boil or roast,
 There's none like Master Gill.¹⁵

Anstey goes on to acclaim Gill's vegetable and vermicelli soups, his roast fowl, stuffed goose, savoury grill, beef, and forcemeat balls, and like Smollett in *Humphry Clinker* makes it plain that fashionable young couples would often call in there to partake of a jelly, a tart, or a basin of soup. These shops-cum-eating-rooms held great appeal for children too:

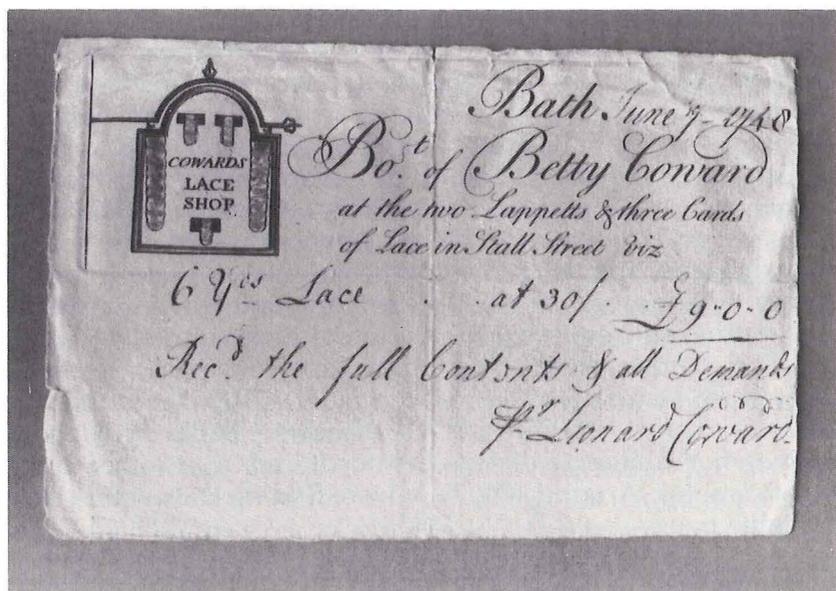
I particularly remember the pastry-cooks' shops, into one of which we entered [Gill's again], and tasted some delicious [raspberry] tarts, the flavour of which seems to have dwelt on my palette to the present time . . . The shop I allude to was built against the north wall of the Abbey church, between two buttresses, attached to one of which was the oven chimney.¹⁶

The confectioners' can have been no less seductive with their piled-up cakes and sweetmeats and pyramids of fruits, while yet another invitation to self-indulgence came in 1774 when the first ice-cream parlour known in Bath opened on the new Pulteney Bridge. All very well in times of plenty, but after bad harvests,

when the poor could no longer afford the staples of life, almost an obscenity, as many recognised. In the hungry years of 1795 and 1800 the baking of white bread was banned and the consumption of pastries, pies and tarts discouraged, and similarly that of ice-cream 'of which a great quantity . . . is consumed in this place for the gratification of luxury alone'.¹⁷

A high proportion of Bath's shops sold non-essentials, among them wine merchants, music vendors, print-shops (whose windows served as public art galleries), perfumers, dealers in china and glassware, the classier furniture-makers and upholsterers, carvers-and-gilders, coach-makers, high-quality drapers and haberdashers, milliners, mercers and lacemen, goldsmiths, watchmakers, and the fancy goods suppliers known as toymen. Of those specifically set up by manufacturers eager to tap a sophisticated market for, say, Irish linens, Nottingham stockings, or Norwich shawls, the most significant was arguably Josiah Wedgwood, the Staffordshire potter, who launched his campaign in 1772 from premises in Westgate Street, transferring in 1775 to the bustling south-east corner of Milsom Street. Acutely aware of the prestigious and more-or-less captive audience he might woo in Bath, he saw that he must appeal to social snobbery and go all out for glamorous presentation, 'for I think the Toy and China shops are richer and more extravagant in their shew here than in London'.¹⁸ To manage the business he installed the reliable William Ward, brother-in-law of his partner Bentley, and he tried from the start to capitalise on his connections by advertising under the banner 'Potter to Her Majesty' and giving due prominence in the shop to his Queen's Ware. (In the same way, during the 1790s when the Duke and Duchess of York made long stays at Bath, such royal appointments were avidly sought by other retailers and then flaunted against competitors.) Under Ward's care the exclusive Wedgwood showcase survived almost twenty years until 1792, whereupon his successor proceeded to diversify into porcelain and glassware as well.

By the later eighteenth century in fact almost all central Bath resembled a commercial showcase, a permanent trade-fair for British and, to some extent, foreign products. Commodities poured into the city from its immediate hinterland, Bristol and the West Country, from South Wales and Ireland, the upper Severn, the industrial Midlands, Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scotland, and in



- 4 Shop bill of Betty Coward, June 1740. The Coward family ran a successful lace shop in Stall Street from the mid-1720s until 1773. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

large quantities from London and the Home Counties, principally carried by regular waggon services but using other forms of transport, including the Avon navigation from the late 1720s, whenever convenient to do so. No wonder that newly arrived provincials felt overawed by the dazzling spread of temptations. The choice seemed limitless. As Mrs Allen enthused in *Northanger Abbey*: 'one can step out of doors and get a thing in five minutes'. And among all this array it was the shops concerned with dress, accoutrements and fancy goods that best demonstrated the power of consumerism and the imperatives of fashion. They above all dealt in the minutiae of personal display, the chic symbols of surplus wealth, the purely ornamental but telling trifles.

To be attired à la mode meant resorting to a wide range of shops and specialists: woollen draper, linen draper, silk mercer, laceman, haberdasher, milliner, hosier, hatter, glover, boot- and shoemaker, tailor, breeches-maker, dress- or mantua-maker, stay-maker, furrier, hairdresser and wig-maker, perfumer, jew-

eller, watchmaker, and toyman (to say nothing of the refurbishing experts, the scourers, re-dyers, laundresses, and clear-starchers). These were not necessarily discrete occupations; there was much overlapping of woollen drapers and tailors, milliners and dressmakers, hatters and hosiers, and many other combinations, and a subtle evolution as styles came and went. Probably the milliners responded most sensitively of all to every fluctuation in the vogue, whether in hats and bonnets, laces and ruffles, aprons, gloves, tippets, quilted petticoats, fans, feathers, artificial flowers, ribbons, and any other trimming and female accessory. They journeyed frequently to London to pick up the latest news from Paris and subscribed no doubt to the fashion-plate magazines which came onto the market about 1770. One of the first duties of many a freshly-arrived visitor to Bath would be to summon her milliner to discuss her needs and to examine a box or two of samples. Around 1740 they were finding Devonshire lace a profitable line:

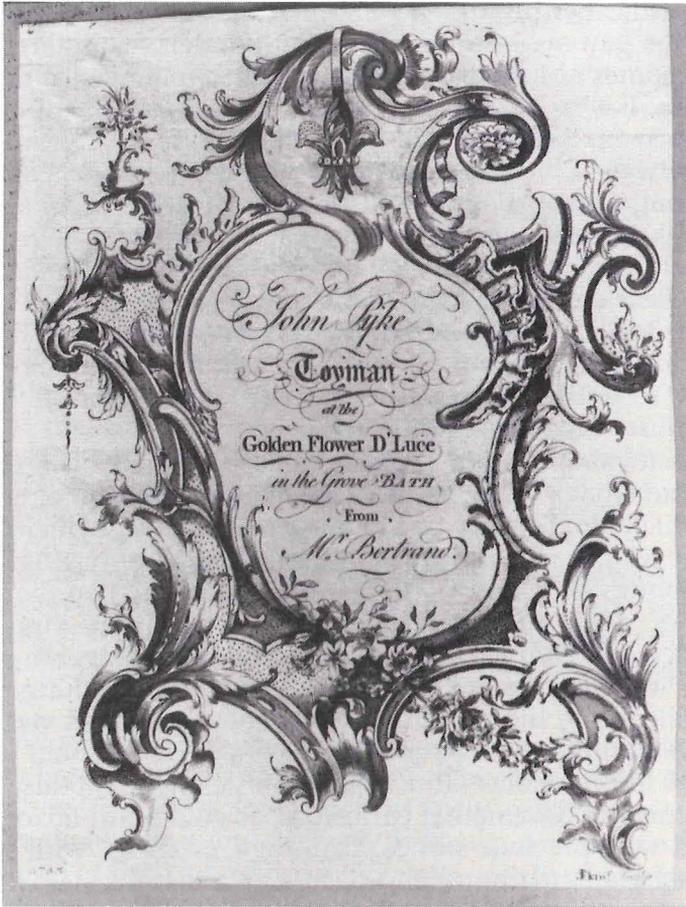
By this Lace the Milliners Business is not a little enhanced; Suits of Wedding Cloaths for the Ladies, from far and near being constantly making in the Shops of the City; and Matrons themselves preferring those Shops to the Shops of almost any other Place for their Head Attire.¹⁹

As John Wood here implies, milliners made up various kinds of garments besides hats, employing seamstresses both in and out of the shop, often at low rates of pay. Unlike most other categories of retailing the millinery business was dominated by women, and at Bath it was accepted as an occupation respectable enough even for the daughters of clergymen. One milliner, Mary Chandler, enjoyed some esteem as a poet and received permission to dedicate her *Description of Bath* (1734) to Princess Amelia. Another found local fame through her skill in artificial flowers, which on one occasion deceived the judges at a flower show. Against all this, however, stands the indisputable fact that milliners' shops, predominantly staffed by nubile young women, attracted a 'vast Resort of young Beaus and Rakes', in the words of a mid-century guide to London parents and guardians, 'which exposes young Creatures to many Temptations, and insensibly debauches their Morals'. Fops and gallants must certainly have hung around these Bath honeypots as well. Some verses of 1795

mention Elizabeth Mandell's shop in Milsom Street: '*booted and spur'd, the gay macaronies, / Bestride Mandell's counter, instead of their ponies*'. Moreover, on the subject of milliners' ethics other testimony has to be borne in mind. It was very likely her long experience of Bath that led Ann Thicknesse to conclude that milliners were a '*very convenient sort of people*', always agreeable to inflating a shop bill beyond the cost of items purchased if it enabled a customer to cheat her husband. Penrose himself was seemingly saved from being overcharged by Janetta Brett & Co. of Wade's Passage only thanks to the timely intervention of a friend who was well in with the firm. 'What pity 'tis milliners should be suffered in a Christian country!', he grumbled after paying his account, resenting perhaps the way the family had been trapped into such frivolous expenditure.²⁰

Bath's toyshops could induce similar reactions. The toymen, wrote one French observer, take advantage 'of a kind of enchantment which blinds every one in these realms of enjoyment, to sell for their weight in gold trifles one is ashamed of having bought after leaving the place'²¹ – items, one imagines, like the 4/- toy basket of eggs with a seal at the bottom that Mrs Sewell purchased for Fanny Penrose. Although in eighteenth-century usage a 'toy' meant any knick-knack, bauble or plaything, including a child's toy, the contents of a toyshop embraced very much more, extending to fancy goods, decorative household articles, personal finery, clocks and watches, duelling weapons, and 'a great variety of ornamental curiosities; as gold Snuff-boxes, finely adorned with precious stones, paintings, or shells, with services of chased Plate, diamond and paste Ear-rings, Buckles, Buttons, and Studs, ornamental china, &c. and a vast variety of curious Trinkets'.²² Inevitably toymen often doubled up as goldsmiths, jewellers, and watchmakers, and in fact many moved into the toy trade from a background in these luxury crafts. The value of such occupations to Bath was recognised early; hence when the city's goldsmith, John Sherston, died around 1700, the Corporation readily bent the rules on freemen to allow another to take his place.²³

The toyman's trade appears to have evolved out of the raffling establishments already in existence by 1700. Partly a selling device, partly a mild form of gambling, partly a diversion for both sexes on the level of the celebrated Bath puppet shows, the raffle



- 5 Advertising bill of John Pyke, toyman in Orange Grove 1752–59, previously employed at Paul Bertrand’s esteemed toyshop on Terrace Walk. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

pointed to the future gift-shop function of the toy dealers’. After the coffee-house, wrote one dashing visitor, ‘to Raffle for a Present for our Mistresses; and with the loss of a Guinea, I brought off a curious Snush [sic] Box, worth four’.²⁴ The chief toy-shops – ‘very handsome . . . like those in London’ (1725) – centred for obvious reasons on the fashionable Gravel Walks/ Orange Grove area, spreading gradually into nearby Wade’s

Passage, the Marketplace and Terrace Walk, where the closely associated jewellers' and goldsmiths' shops also tended to cluster. Unavoidable and ostentatious, even at this early period they were familiar to every spa habitué: George Speren (well known for his fan paintings showing the sights of Bath), Mrs Deard, John and Sarah Wicksteed, Paul Bertrand, and several more. One was remembered by Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in a nostalgic quatrain:

Farewell to Deard's, and all her toys,
Which glitter in her shop,
Deluding traps to girls and boys,
The warehouse of the fop.²⁵

And 'warehouse', it should be noted, had no pejorative overtones; quite the contrary, it meant a large shop with a varied stock and was something for the smaller tradesman to aspire to.

John Wicksteed's reputation was bound up with his 'machine', a seal-engraving or 'jewelling' mill, probably water-powered, which he brought about 1737 from Bathampton to purpose-built premises on Ralph Allen's new coach-road, a favourite point for excursions out of town. Here he engraved coats-of-arms to order on Brazilian pebblestones and set them in gold, or carved cameos and gems for sale at the Orange Grove toyshop run by his wife and which made fine china something of a specialty.²⁶ Paul Bertrand on Terrace Walk similarly combined the selling of toys, jewellery and porcelain under one roof, though in his London years his métier had been goldsmithing. Probably of Huguenot ancestry, like so many goldsmiths of the time, Bertrand grew rich enough to own a house in lower Gay Street, well away from the shop, and to serve on the governing board of the Hospital. When he retired three of his employees branched out on their own, the most successful being another London-trained man, the jeweller Paul Roubel, at his toyshop on the corner of Wade's Passage at the sign of the Hand & Solitaire.

A further instance of metropolitan ties can be seen with William Rogers, who arrived in Bath from a New Bond Street firm about 1747 and continued in business for the next thirty years in and around Abbey Churchyard. One of his apprentices, Philip Rundle, departed in the later 1760s to try his luck in London and eventually created the greatest goldsmithing firm yet seen in

Britain, making himself a millionaire in the process. Rogers flourished on a smaller scale. A handbill he had printed showed a typical mid-century toyman's blend of the ornamental and semi-useful, including buckles, sleeve buttons, watch chains and trinkets, spurs, earrings, necklaces, a large supply of the then modish garnets, pocket-books and letter-cases, purses, smelling bottles, toothpick cases, combs, patch boxes, steel thimbles, knives and scissors, spectacles, enamelled candlesticks, and Pontypool-ware tea kettles.²⁷ All articles that would make acceptable presents or souvenirs of a stay in Bath, they also indicate the dependence even of a practising craftsman, as Rogers was, on manufactures from outside. While only Pontypool is actually named as a source, the penetration of Birmingham goods into this toyman's stock is obvious from the list and confirmed by another advertisement. In due course Rogers began selling products from Sheffield too.

Bath still supported a number of outstanding craftsmen whose quality products bore their own distinctive stamp: names such as the watchmakers Henry Stimson, Thomas Field, Samuel Jones and Richard Laurence; the Masters family, goldsmiths and workers in filigree; the jewellers Paul Roubel referred to earlier, William Tresilian (designer of the medallion of office for the master-of-ceremonies), and Henry Chilcot – whose daughter had a flair for hairwork pictures and devices for rings and locketts. Nor should the local braziers-and-ironsmiths and the carvers-and-gilders be forgotten, some of them being capable of fine ornamental wares such as the toymen sold. Nevertheless Bath's toy warehouses of the later eighteenth century were essentially centres of distribution for the commodities of the dawning Industrial Revolution, and that meant manufactures brought in from London, Sheffield and Birmingham above all. Without this profuse supply of ready-made goods, backed up by astute marketing and the cultivation of brand images, the toy businesses run by William Evill, Lewis Bull, William Moore, and Newman & Glover would have been inconceivable.

The Evill brothers came to notice in the 1750s.²⁸ The eldest, George, was a tailor who later moved into woollen drapery retailing. The next, John, soon set up a shoeshop, dealing on the side in second-hand clothing. Matthew, the youngest, tried tailoring, umbrella-making, baking, and ultimately brewing. William

Clayton Esq. Bath Feb: 28. 1784
 Bought of William Basnett -
 JEWELLER, GOLDSMITH & TOY-MAN.
 In Bond Street facing Nelson Street.
 a square plait in Glass ———— 1. 6
 a p: fine paste shoe Buckles ———— 6. 10. 0
 £ 6. 10. 0
 Recd from the said in full pmt
 £ 6. 10. 0
 Wm Basnett

- 6 Shop bill of William Basnett, February 1784. Originally a stationer, Basnett moved in 1770 to the upper end of Bond Street and began to concentrate on jewellery and toy goods. (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

Evill himself had by 1759 fitted up a shop in the Marketplace at the sign of the Golden Knife-and-Fork and Stocking-Legs, trading, that is, in cutlery and hosiery goods. Within a few years hosiery decisively gave way to Bath toys, among them wedding rings, gilt thimbles, watches and silverware. By 1765 he had appointed agents on his behalf in London, Birmingham and Sheffield, the key centres of manufacture, and opened a workshop on Borough Walls where specialist Salisbury workmen were employed to sharpen and repair knives, tools, and surgeons' instruments. Soon he had a wealth of attractions on display, from musical clocks to plated tableware, from filigree and toilet sets to patent spectacles and firearms. He hired out silver-handled cutlery, candlesticks and other necessities to short-stay visitors

(just as the chinamen loaned tea services and wine-glasses). He provided candlesticks, knives, forks, spoons, and Birmingham quadrille dishes for the new Upper Assembly Room. One of his customers is proved by a shopbill of 1771–72 to have been Richard Brinsley Sheridan, who purchased a toothpick case, a hair locket, a fancy ring and two seals, a picture in a case, an expensive pair of garnet buttons, and – more ominously in view of the two duels he fought over Elizabeth Linley at this period – pairs of swords and foils.²⁹ Another customer, fictional this time, is neatly caught in William Madden's *The Bath Macaroni* in which the exquisite fop boasts of his recent acquisition:

See, my Patagonian buckles,
Adorn'd with pearls, adorn'd with cockles;
I have worn them just three days,
They are the ton, as EVILL says.

Those tonish buckles may well have been fabricated in the firm's own workshop, which certainly preserved its reputation at least into the 1790s when it created the gold box in which the Duke of York received the freedom of Bath. All the same, Evill and his various partners remained heavily reliant on London, the Black Country and South Yorkshire; these they toured personally in search of novelties, always paying cash down and so obtaining their supplies at discount rates. Named manufacturers and patented articles often figured in their publicity: Ribright's spectacles, Dollond's scientific instruments, Evers's warming pans, Clay's tea trays and caddies in lacquered papier-mâché, pistols from Gill, Waters & Co. Probably supreme among all the metalware suppliers to the Bath toyshops, though rarely if ever credited by name, was Boulton & Fothergill, with its enormous and ever-varying output of elegant artefacts, aggressively marketed both at home and abroad.³⁰

The other leading toyshops were by no means carbon copies of Evill's. Each had its individual style. Lewis Bull left his former employer, the substantial toyman John Davis of Terrace Walk, on the eve of the latter's bankruptcy in 1760 and set up independently in Orange Grove. Emphasising the top end of the toyman's range, within a decade he amassed sufficient capital first to move shop to a better position in Orange Grove (buying up a whole milliner's stock for the privilege), and then to acquire

Leake's famous circulating library round the corner in Terrace Walk. For nearly five years up to summer 1775 he ran the businesses in tandem on two sites, before transferring his extensive holdings of jewellery, silver plate and other goods to the Terrace Walk premises. In 1777 he announced he would gradually sell off all this merchandise in order to concentrate on the library, hardly bargaining for the fact that it would take seven years to do so, in spite of price reductions and special sales, and would even then require an auction to complete the job – in late December 1784, a favourable moment Bull pointed out for the purchase of New Year gifts, souvenirs and keepsakes.

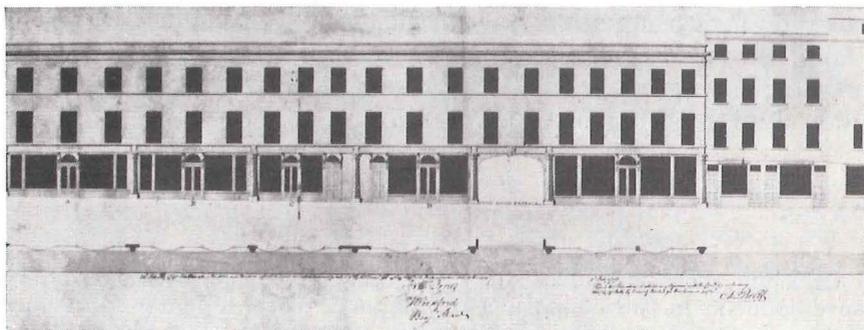
Whereas Bull switched from toy trade to circulating library, William Moore ended up vending toys after a first career in hairdressing, on which subject he even published an instructional pamphlet.³¹ His sales philosophy recalls that of the linen draper Richard Prynne discussed earlier: fixed prices, refusal to be under-sold, a huge selection of goods, relentless advertising, and the constant offering of novelties. Like Bull he too kept a double business going for a time, and he never stopped selling perfumery articles, in which he had special expertise, alongside the more orthodox toy commodities. The ambition of his Orange Grove store might be gauged from the very title he gave it, the Universal Toy-Shop, and from the sheer variety he claimed to stock, now umbrellas and diamond brilliants, now fireworks and coffee urns, at prices from one penny to fifty pounds. Always fond of citing statistics, in 1786 he bragged of over 20,000 different items, goading one of his Bath competitors into a contemptuous rejoinder. Bretton & Son, professional jewellers in Milsom Street, after explaining that they made a point of not displaying their best pieces in the window, invited members of the public to step inside,

where, without descending to the trifling and puerile manner of renumerating [sic] each separate article in order to swell the tale to tens of thousands, they will find such a selection of truly valuable articles, as few have in their power to exhibit.³²

Moore studiously ignored the hint, however, and by 1794 his total had climbed to more than 25,000. Yet even that hardly began to match the show at the London, Sheffield and Birmingham Repository, now established in Somersetshire Buildings on Milsom Street.

The Repository arrived on the local scene with a big popular sale held in the winter of 1782–3 at the abandoned assembly rooms on the west side of Terrace Walk, a sale so successful that it became permanent. Not only did the proprietors, William Glover and J.L. Newman, set very competitive prices, they ventured into territory beyond the scope of the regular toyshops, displaying for example prints, maps, and musical instruments. In 1788 the partnership broke up amicably and Newman carried on. To extend his range he became an agent for Allgood & Edwards' lacquered metalware from Pontypool and sold reproduction oil paintings on behalf of the Polygraphic Society of London (exhibited in a separate room where customers were also welcome to read the London, provincial and Irish newspapers in return for a small subscription). After five years' enterprising effort on his own account Newman received notice to quit the old assembly rooms. Dubious about finding premises spacious enough to continue; he began selling off and then auctioning his stock. Unexpectedly though, the national financial crisis of 1793 which bankrupted the Somersetshire Bank in Milsom Street left properties there vacant, and Newman moved into no. 40 with fresh supplies in April 1794.

It can only be assumed that his financial position had by then become insecure; the fact is that in October he sold off again at prime cost and by auction. The following spring his former partner Glover took a lease on the adjoining building and launched a new London, Sheffield and Birmingham warehouse on a magnificent scale. In the closing years of the century Glover's showrooms, first at no. 39 then from 1798 at no. 40 Milsom Street, presented one of the finest displays of manufactures in the whole country, the metropolis itself hardly excepted. Much of the characteristic toyshop range was on view – jewellery, buckles, watches, firearms, cutlery, tableware, optical instruments, lacquer – but eclipsing all that the musical instruments (even church organs), fine coach harnesses, prints and pictures in burnished gold frames, and all the paraphernalia of gracious living, including rich carpets, pier glasses, cut-glass chandeliers, bronze figure lamps, chiming clocks, elegant chairs and tables, bedsteads, marble-lined wash-stands, chimneypieces, and composition ornaments. The word 'toyshop' ceases to be appropriate, for here we have intimations of the future department store.



- 7 Detail from Thomas Baldwin's plan for the remodelling of variously sized shops in Cheap Street, 1790. From left to right the sequence shows the premises of Thomas Woodford (linen draper), Arthur Jones (woollen draper), Edward Hallett (hosier and hatter from Orange Grove), Benjamin Shaw (linen draper), and, after the passage to the Abbey Churchyard, Samuel Hazard's bookshop and circulating library, John Minisie (hairdresser), Peter Ferbrache (hairdresser), and part of the shop of Lewis & Rogers (saddlers). (Courtesy Bath Reference Library)

Yet this was but one of Bath's luxury retailers. As the eighteenth century drew to a close, Milsom Street and Bond Street alone could muster several jewellers and toymen, a dealer in scientific and optical instruments, a cutler, perhaps half-a-dozen milliners, a lace merchant, three drapers, a hatter-and-hosier, a hairdresser and perfumer, a printseller, three circulating libraries and bookshops, the fashionable pastrycook Molland's, and the Wedgwood showroom, to mention no more. This was where Jane Austen and the characters of her imagination came window-shopping. This was where Parson Woodforde, forever journeying through Bath, bought his presents: a riding cane, say, for his nephew from William Basnett's toyshop in Bond Street ('it proved a Cheat on us for it came into 2. Pieces on the Road'); or bargain-price muslins for his sisters and nieces, and a waistcoat piece for his brother, all from Percival & Cunditt of Milsom Street.³³

As with Sir Walter Scott, who remembered from his childhood 'the splendours of a toyshop somewhere near the Orange Grove',³⁴ these Aladdin's caves made an enduring impression on visitors and residents alike. But the shops were not putting on a show for its own sake. Their purpose was to ensnare, to capture the share of the market without which they could not survive in a capitalist economy,

to outdo their competitors, to turn their locked-up capital into profit. And their customers, already half-mesmerised by the exhibitionist, emulative, vogueish milieu that was eighteenth-century Bath, had their own good reasons for colluding.

Notes

Information about individual shops has been pieced together largely from advertisements in Bath newspapers of the time. Where it derives from other sources or involves direct quotation the reference is given below. Some references have been grouped.

- 1 *Life of Mary Anne SchimmelPenninck*, C.C. Hankin (ed.), Vol. 1 (London, 1858), pp. 80–1. John Macky, *A Journey through England* (London, c. 1722), p. 128. Bath Reference Library, 'Diary of a Tour by Three Students from Cambridge, 1725', MS.B914.238, p. 114. Louis Simond, *Journal of a Tour and Residence in Great Britain . . . 1810 and 1811*, Vol. 1 (Edinburgh, 1817), p. 20.
- 2 Robert Southey, *Letters from England*, J. Simmons (ed.) (London, 1951), p. 472.
- 3 Key texts on English eighteenth-century consumerism and the pursuit of status are: Neil McKendrick et al., *The Birth of a Consumer Society* (London, 1982) and Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town, 1660–1770* (Oxford, 1989). For shops in general see Dorothy Davis, *A History of Shopping* (London, 1966) and David Alexander, *Retailing in England during the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1970).
- 4 John Penrose, *Letters from Bath, 1766–1767*, B. Mitchell and H. Penrose (eds.) (Gloucester, 1983), p. 198.
- 5 *Bath Chronicle* 1 Nov 1787. Window dressing in London is described in Sophie von La Roche, *Sophie in London 1786*, C. Williams (ed.) (London, 1933), pp. 87, 111–12, 141–2, 171–2, 262.
- 6 *Bath Chronicle* 20 June and 22 Aug 1771. The shop was William Evill's; in 1798 the glass case at the entrance was described as large and circular, while the shop interior was "in every part lined with glass" – *Bath Herald* 3 March 1798.
- 7 *Bath Journal* 24 Sept 1744.
- 8 Daniel Defoe, *The Complete English Tradesman*, Vol. 1 (Oxford, 1841), p. 60.
- 9 R. Campbell, *The London Tradesman* (London, 1747, repr. 1969), pp. 197, 147–8.
- 10 *Bath Chronicle* 15 Oct 1795, 21 April 1796.
- 11 Julian Hoppit, *Risk and Failure in English Business, 1700–1800* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 85–6.
- 12 Mary Delany, *The Autobiography and Correspondence of Mary Granville, Mrs Delany, Lady Llanover* (ed.), 1st series, Vol.3 (London, 1861), pp. 606–7.
- 13 Stephen Dowell, *A History of Taxation and Taxes in England*, 2nd ed., Vols. 3–4 (London, 1888). Patrick K. O'Brien, 'The Political Economy of British Taxation, 1660–1815', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, Vol. 41 (1988), pp. 1–32.
- 14 *Bath Chronicle* 7 July 1785. For the petition of the Bath retailers see *Journals of the House of Commons* 31 Jan 1786. The relevant Commons debate of 12 March 1788 was reported in *The Parliamentary History of England*, Vol. 27,

- cols. 168–77. Note also the lengthy observations of ‘A Shopkeeper’ in *Bath Chronicle* 10 April 1788.
- 15 Christopher Anstey, *The New Bath Guide* (repr. of c. 1820 ed., Bath, 1978), pp. 25, 27–8.
 - 16 John Britton, *The Auto-Biography*, Vol. 1 (London, 1850), p. 58.
 - 17 *Bath Herald* 25 Oct 1800.
 - 18 Josiah Wedgwood, *The Selected Letters*, A. Finer and G. Savage (eds.) (London, 1965), p. 124, letter to Bentley dated Bath 6 June 1772.
 - 19 John Wood, *A Description of Bath*, 2nd ed. (Bath, 1765 repr. 1969), p. 436.
 - 20 R. Campbell, op. cit., p. 208. *Bath: an Adumbration in Rhyme. By an Officer* (Bath, 1795). Ann Thicknesse, *The School for Fashion*, Vol. 1 (London, 1800), pp. 105–6. John Penrose, op. cit., pp. 151 and 153.
 - 21 A.F. Prévost, cited in A. Barbeau, *Life and Letters at Bath in the 18th Century* (London, 1904), p. 80.
 - 22 Joseph Collyer, *The Parent’s and Guardian’s Directory, and the Youth Guide* (London, 1761), pp. 280–1.
 - 23 Bath Reference Library, Bath Corporation Minute Books (Schickle transcript), 9 July 1700.
 - 24 *A Step to the Bath, with a Character of the Place* [by Ned Ward?] (London, 1700), pp. 159 and 165. The 1725 quotation comes from ‘Diary of a Tour by Three Students’, op. cit., p. 118.
 - 25 Printed sheet, perhaps from a magazine, in Bath Reference Library, Scrapbook with spine-title *Bath Miscellanies*.
 - 26 British Library, Handbill printed for John Wicksteed (Bath, 1741).
 - 27 British Library, Handbill printed for William Rogers (Bath, c. 1760?). On Rundell see W. Doran, *Memoirs of the Life of the Late Philip Rundell Esq.* (London, n.d.).
 - 28 I am indebted to Kerry Birch for help in elucidating the Evill family.
 - 29 Bath Reference Library, ‘New Assembly Rooms, Furnishing Committee Minute Book’ (typescript), 30 April, 6 June, 20 June, 22 Aug, 28 Oct 1771 and 7 May 1772. Sheridan’s bill is in the Library’s tradecards collection.
 - 30 E. Robinson, ‘Eighteenth-Century Commerce and Fashion: Matthew Boulton’s Marketing Techniques’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, Vol. 16 (1963–4), pp. 39–60.
 - 31 William Moore, *The Art of Hair-Dressing, and Making it Grow Fast* (Bath, n.d.).
 - 32 *Bath Chronicle* 30 Nov 1786.
 - 33 James Woodforde, *The Diary: the First Six Norfolk Years*, R.L. Winstanley (ed.), Vol. 1 (1981), entry for 22 Aug 1777. James Woodforde, *The Diary of a Country Parson*, J. Beresford (ed.), Vol. 4 (1929), entries for 1 July and 12 Oct 1793.
 - 34 Sir Walter Scott, ‘A Memoir of his Early Years’, cited from Paul Cresswell, *Bath in Quotes* (Bath, 1985), p. 78.

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