



# Shops and shopping

## *A short history*

### **Anthony Hordern & Sons' New Palace Emporium, 1905**

The Hordern retailing dynasty had its humble beginnings in the 1820s, when Ann Hordern developed her stay-making business into a drapery warehouse. She first opened a drapery and millinery shop at the front of her King Street cottage. Her husband Anthony, who operated a coach-building business at the rear of their premises, joined her and the business became a family affair. Anthony Hordern's retail shop eventually grew into a department store and became a household name in NSW. The New Palace Emporium opened in 1905 and by the 1920s it had 3,000 employees and a mail order department occupying several floors. *Advertisement courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW*

The earliest retailing activities in NSW began in a modest way. The government store, known as the Commissariat, supplied the fledgling settlement at Sydney Cove with essential provisions, and enterprising ships' crews conducted a flourishing trade exchanging non-perishable goods for food. In time, the colonists were able to purchase local produce, perhaps even snapping up a bargain at auction when someone left the colony or died. Many also ordered goods direct from Great Britain through family or friends. Until a regular currency and bank was established by Governor Macquarie in 1817, settlers relied largely on bartering or bank drafts from London.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a regular Saturday produce market at what is now Circular Quay, and hawkers plied their wares in the streets. There were a few dining rooms, and a small group of retailers sold essential supplies procured in bulk from visiting or chartered ships. Over the next century Sydney established itself as the major point of distribution of imported goods to the rest of eastern Australia. As the number of free settlers in the colony increased, more specialised shops also began to appear. They were typically domestic in appearance, similar to British shops of the period. The shop front was usually established at the street level, and the owner's family lived in rooms above or behind the shop.

In keeping with the domestic scale and character, early shops usually featured timber windows divided by sash bars into multiple panes. Passers-by might peer into the dim gas-lit interior, or inspect goods on display at the doorway. By the 1840s the streets of Sydney were dotted with canvas awnings, and signs advertised all manner of wares. In 1844 Louisa Meredith observed how Sydney shopkeepers adopted 'a little code of their own, prescribing the proper distances to be observed between drapers and haberdashers, butchers and pastry cooks'.<sup>1</sup> New technological innovations revolutionised retailing in the mid-nineteenth century. Gas lighting began to illuminate Sydney streets from 1841, providing opportunities for window shopping and trading after dark. Most shopkeepers already used gaslights inside their shops, although drapers in particular preferred daylight in order to display the true colours of their merchandise.

Many shopkeepers who displayed their wares at the doorway or outside the shop would employ a child to ward off wayward dogs or thieves, and to rescue bolts of fabric and other merchandise from wind and rain. The first plate-glass windows in NSW were installed in the Farmer's department store in Sydney in 1854. Bigger windows meant that shopkeepers could now display their merchandise to passing vehicular traffic. This was particularly important in a city where

the wives and daughters of wealthy families went on shopping expeditions by horse-drawn carriage, rather than negotiating on foot poor roads and the bustle of street life.

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## Arcades

Shopping arcades originated in Paris in about 1800. They were private streets or precincts, usually covered with a glass roof and lined with artisans' stalls. They often featured an elaborate arched entrance to lure customers from the street. Some had decorative entrance canopies, and ornamental gates at each entrance that could be closed after shop hours.

Arcades were immediately popular with Europe's wealthy classes, who could promenade and shop far from the dust and grime of public thoroughfares. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were arcades in nearly every European city. They were usually tenanted by retailers at the luxury end of the market, selling fashion items such as jewellery, millinery, books and music.

Sydney Arcade (1881) and the Strand Arcade (1892) were amongst the first to appear in Sydney. The Queen Victoria Building (1898) was built as a general market, although its design emulated the grand arcades of Europe.

In the 1930s there was a spate of new arcades built in country towns across NSW. The arcades often featured a picture theatre as well as a range of speciality shops.

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By the early years of the twentieth century, the comfort of shop interiors had become an important attribute. Given the fact that the larger stores were generally selling the same types of goods, their competitive edge came from price, range and the quality of service that they could offer.

Cool, light and airy shops were considered attractive, and a far cry from the small, cramped, gas-lit shops of the early days of the colony. Awnings, colonnades or verandahs became important features, protecting both window displays and customers. Stores appealing to wealthier clientele often emulated the style of a grand residence, complete with elegant surroundings and discrete serving staff. Stores with departments for different types of goods

increasingly segregated the merchandise according to gender - women's clothing in the vicinity of haberdashery, fashion accessories and household necessities, and men's clothing located near sporting goods and hardware items. This categorisation of merchandise along gender lines also occurred in smaller country stores, and even extended to separate entrances and window displays for men and women.

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## 'Ladies this way' – separating men and women shoppers

Retailers have gone to great lengths to cultivate the female shopper. From the early twentieth century many stores produced elaborate displays of fashion items. They lavished attention on their women customers and displayed goods to appeal to feminine fantasies.

In dividing their stores into specialised departments such as clothing, hardware and shoes, retailers began to designate men's or women's departments. David Jones had a Men's Grill. Gowings installed a barber's shop (one is still open for business). Women had their own rest rooms complete with writing areas and telephones. Even the furnishings reflected the differences: marble floors and timber fittings for men, mirrors and soft fabrics for women.

As a general rule, women were thought to be more likely to linger in a shop and browse, while men were inclined to make quick forays. Shopkeepers were advised by trade journals and popular opinion that men were particularly averse to women's clothing departments, so shops were laid out accordingly.

Even the smaller stores followed this trend. The *Draper of Australasia* journal tested the water in 1925 by running a competition on 'How to Attract Women to a Men's Wear Store'. One entrant suggested labelling separate entrances and dividing the shop down the middle! Men, he said, could shop 'without qualms of conscience or fear of women's interruption'.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Mrs Charles Meredith, *Notes and Sketches of New South Wales*, John Murray, London, 1844, p52, cited in Beverley Kingston, *Basket, Bag and Trolley: a History of Shopping in Australia*, p19.

<sup>2</sup> *The Draper of Australasia*, 20 October 1925, p467.

New services such as hydraulic lifts, electric lighting and escalators encouraged customers to move freely around spacious new multi-storied shops. Changes in the scale and methods of selling introduced greater efficiencies and enabled goods to be sold more cheaply. As stores became larger and busier, the knowledge that was once demanded of store assistants became increasingly fragmented or irrelevant.

In the early years of the twentieth century there seemed to be a thriving shopping street in every town. In Sydney shopping went through a boom period lasting from the 1880s until the 1920s. It faltered only briefly during the 1890s economic depression and a severe drought a few years later. The drapery trade fast became the largest single trade in NSW, with a turnover equal to all the Sydney and metropolitan food retailers combined. The larger drapers based in Sydney gradually dominated the clothing trade, extending their mail order businesses to entice country customers. Some of the more successful drapers branched out into other lines of goods and created department stores.



#### **Shops along George Street, Sydney 1847**

George Street from the Commissariat Guard. *Drawing courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.*

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## *Going to town; the rise of the department store*

The gold rushes in NSW during the 1850s brought a sharp increase in population and an associated boom in retailing. Some of the older general stores were expanded and rebuilt. In Sydney and country towns a new era and scale of shopping emerged with the department store or palace emporium.

Many of the now legendary department stores began as drapers or ironmongers, later expanding to cater for general household merchandise. Reputedly based on Aristide Boucicault's 'Bon Marché' Paris store, which was built in 1852, the urban department stores were also following in the tradition of the humble universal providers. They became purveyors of every household need.

Some of the larger Sydney-based department stores, such as David Jones' George Street store (built in 1887) and E. Way and Company in Pitt Street (1891), went on to become doyens of the early twentieth century retail trade. With their elaborate facades, entertaining window displays, vast ranges of merchandise, impeccable service and attention to comfort, the major department stores became household names for both city and country customers. Many people still remember them with great affection from childhood shopping trips. These city stores were mostly family businesses that associated themselves with stability and conservative, patriotic values.

The big department stores also occupied extensive sites along Sydney's main thoroughfares, and by the 1920s their towers became city landmarks. They were highly competitive and enticed country customers through extensive mail order services. Department stores aspired to the style and glitz of Paris and New York.

Some stores established their own factories, finding it more profitable and competitive to produce their own 'house brand' of drapery, beds, bicycles, ironworks, and food lines. Whether offering imported or locally-made products, the Sydney department stores succeeded in fostering an image of glamour and quality, and this was supported by aggressive advertising, in-house attractions such as dining rooms and entertainment, credit services and huge store resources.

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The retail co-operative movement that started in late-nineteenth century Britain also translated into a similar movement in the colonies. In Sydney the Civil Service Store was established in 1871 as a response to the demands of an emerging middle class requiring conservatively priced household goods. Elsewhere in NSW retail co-operatives were formed to provide lower priced goods for families in provincial towns and to supply goods to the more isolated agricultural settlements such as those in the Riverina and the South Coast.

After the dreary years of World War I shops picked up on the new and lively mood of the twenties. Stores began to change dramatically in appearance. This was the jazz age, and the department stores led the revolution in style. Many smaller shops adopted the new look and added some glamour of their own.

In the 1920s and 1930s many shops were remodelled or built in the art moderne style. Dark, small shop fronts were out. Large panoramic display windows were in. There was shiny stainless steel, chrome and black glass in abundance. Large display windows were often deeply recessed, with curving or angled glass windows to lead the customer past extensive window displays into the store. This enabled shopkeepers to have their store interiors permanently on view, even when the shop was closed. Prominent shop signs became popular and were painted or fixed to a window or parapet and even displayed inside the store.

Window dressing became an art form. Fashionable displays featured selected items carefully arranged, rather than stockpiled with special offers. The new interwar style dictated that dark shops and heavy fittings were no longer acceptable. The new style incorporated glass counters and shelves, with stock kept out of view in storage areas. Clothes and accessories were displayed on free-standing frames or mannequins.

The interwar period also signalled a revolution in the way people shopped, particularly in the cities and suburbs. 'Cash-and-carry' grocery shops began to appear in the 1920s and signalled the beginning of the self-service style of shopping that we know today. Many grocers still continued to provide credit and offer the personalised service that their customers expected. However, by World War II more and more shops were converting to self-service and shopping habits began to change. Shops were refitted with self-service tables and refrigerated display cabinets. Customers became familiar with navigating chromium turnstiles,

selecting their purchases and queuing up at a row of cash registers. Bright lighting inside and coloured neon lighting displays outside, enticed customers to inspect and buy.

Chain stores were also taking off, and people flocked to them for bargains. This informal style of shopping suited the new era of self-service. Low cost household goods and minimum counter service gave them the capacity to handle large numbers of shoppers efficiently and anonymously.

Moran and Cato had pioneered grocery chain stores in Australia back in the 1880s. The first Woolworths Stupendous Bargain Basement opened in Sydney's Imperial Arcade in 1924. Within 15 years Woolworths had built 78 stores. Over the next two decades the company spawned branches throughout metropolitan Sydney and country NSW. Meanwhile, in spite of the growth of the chain store networks, country shops remained relatively unchanged and people in rural NSW generally shopped in the old ways until well into the 1960s.



#### **Winn and Company's Drapery Emporium, Newcastle, 1907**

In an era when shops were judged by the quality of their personal service, the appearance and manner of shop assistants was all-important. They were subject to rigid discipline, store rules, and low wages. Sales staff in the larger department stores were compensated with superior amenities, training and social opportunities that the smaller retailers could not offer. In return, the stores demanded high standards and absolute loyalty from their staff. *Photograph courtesy of the National Library of Australia.*

The arrival of regional shopping centres heralded perhaps the greatest shopping revolution of all. Top Ryde Shopping Centre in Sydney opened in 1957, six months after Australia's first complex was completed in Brisbane. Top Ryde had parking for 400 cars and provided a covered pedestrian mall and an assortment of shops. It was described at the time as recapturing 'the carnival atmosphere of the old European marketplace', while offering the housewife a place to shop in safety and convenience.<sup>3</sup> Based on the success of neighbourhood shopping in the United States, these huge sites dedicated to retailing became the symbol of the increasing prosperity, consumerism and our increasing dependence on the car after World War II.

Over the next two decades the family-owned city department stores that had set shopping styles and standards for most of the century were in decline. The trend was clear: between the 1960s and 1990s retail shopping in Australia drifted inexorably towards the suburbs and away from city centres. Traditional shopping streets attempted to draw back customers by emphasising the range of goods that the different shops could offer, the convenience of nearby public transport, and the character offered by a diversity of building styles that modern shopping centres could not match. Many suburbs and country towns created pedestrian shopping malls, with entertainment and off-street parking.

However, while the smaller shopping streets and individual stores continue to struggle for their share of the market, it is the privately-owned and strictly regulated environment of the regional shopping centre that dominates our shopping experiences in the early twenty-first century. In the end, large-scale shopping centres are yet another chapter in the history of over 200 years of retailing in Australia.



#### **The Model Store, Boorowa**

Department stores or emporia also flourished in country towns, usually in elegant buildings that presided over the local shopping precinct. This two-story country emporium at Boorowa was built in 1918 by John Learmont, who also built a store at Tumut. The old emporium is now a newsagency, and the building still features many of its original timber counters, shelving and display cabinets, as well as this elaborate central stairwell and plaster ceiling. The current owner has also kept important movable items that he hopes to reinstate one day. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*



**Dressing the window was the cheapest form of advertising**

In the interwar period window dressing and ticket writing became an art form. The *Draper of Australasia* journal ran a regular feature called 'Window Dressing: the Art of Display', and awarded prizes for the best design. This 1925 evening display for McCathies in Sydney was championship runner-up. *The Draper of Australasia journal* courtesy of State Reference Library, State Library of NSW.

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**MacKenzie's Grocery Department, Manilla, NSW, c.1912**

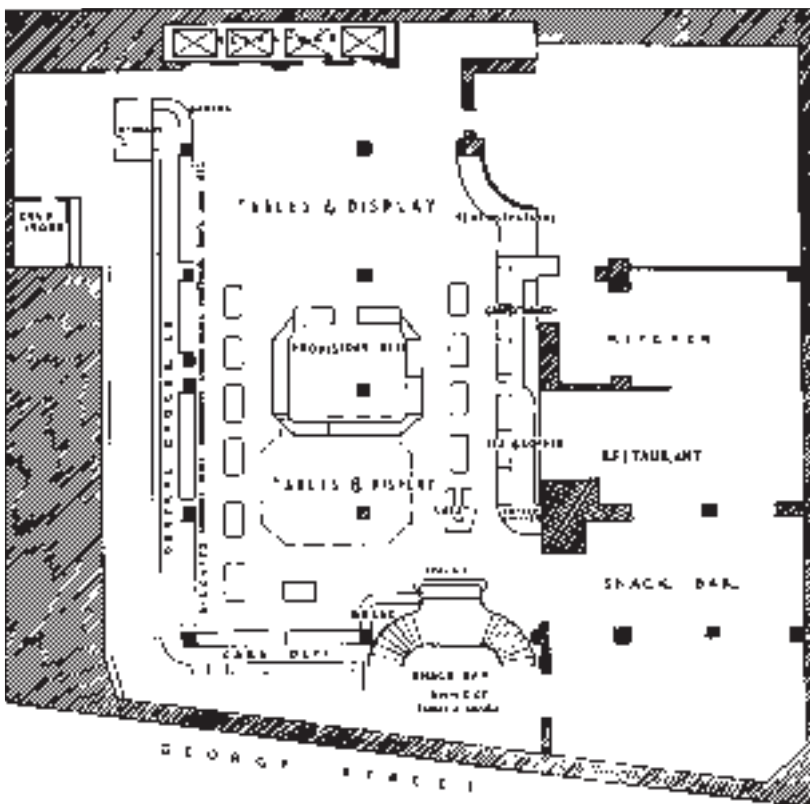
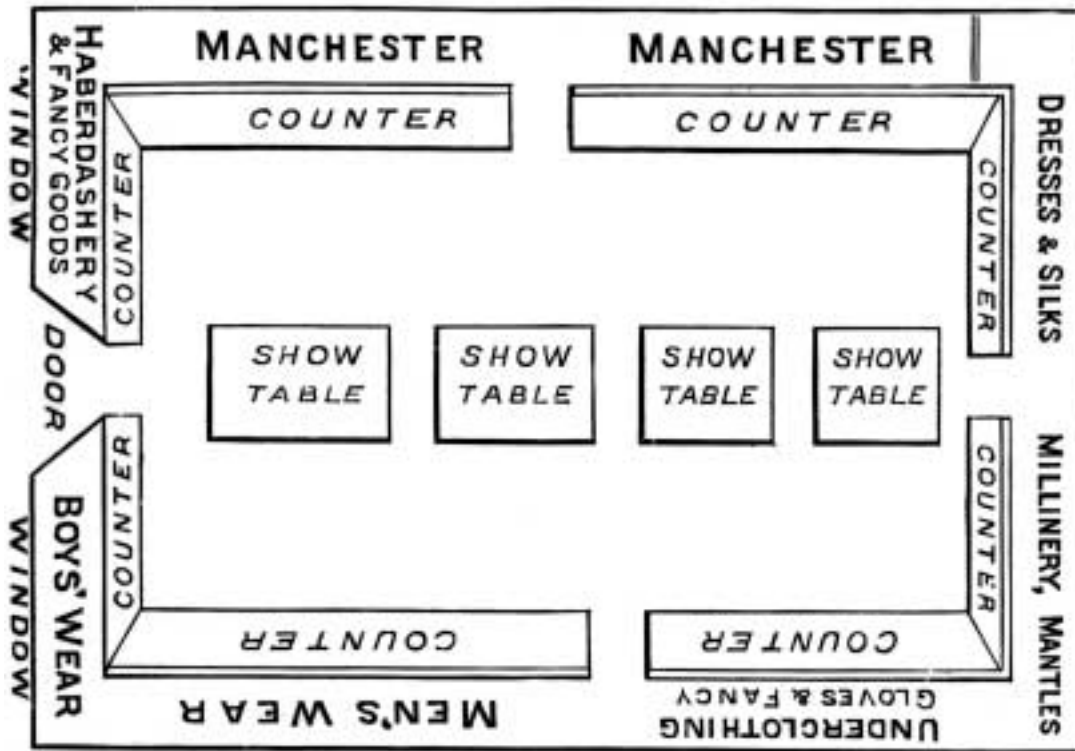
This grocery department within a larger general store is typical of the period. The general store or universal provider emerged as the most common type of shop throughout NSW. They offered everything from food to crockery, clothing, fabric, shoes, hardware and stationery. Note the Bentwood chairs provided for customers waiting to have their orders filled. *Photograph courtesy of Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of NSW.*

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**Black and White Milk Bar, Martin Place, Sydney, 1932**

Mick Adams migrated from Greece at 16, and in 1932 opened Australia's first milk bar in Martin Place. It was an instant success. Within five years there were an estimated 4,000 milk bars across Australia. Armed with Mick Adams' recipe for success, a friend claims to have introduced the idea to London. Many shops have been established by newly arrived migrants seeking a means to earn a living. In turn, they have introduced new ideas, colour and vitality to our shopping streets. *Photographs courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.*



**Shop layouts, Sydney, 1903 and 1937**

Two versions of a recommended layout for a clothing store, showing changing ideas about store layout and service. The 1903 design emphasised service at the counter, while the 1937 floor plan encouraged impulse buying from bargain tables and show cases. *The Draper of Australasia Diary, 1903* and *Rydges Business Journal, 1937*. Drawings courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.