

There were certain underlying conditions that enabled department stores to grow up when they did. From the start, they all catered for middle-class customers and set out to convey to them an air of luxury and solid comfort. Of necessity, they all arose in central positions where large numbers of people could reach them easily by means of public transport. Physically, they grew up in an era of big technical developments in building so that they could afford multi-storey palaces and could have enormous plate-glass windows for display, lighting and novelties like lifts.

Above all, the department stores rose with the rise of Victorian white-collar workers, the small-scale businessmen and professionals whose womenfolk had money to spare for a few luxuries and were gradually switching the emphasis of their housekeeping expenditure from food to other items.

Most of these stores drew enough customers to fill their huge shops by offering two new things. One was the new manufactures, particularly clothing, goods and accessories, household furnishings and equipment of all kinds that were coming out of the factories in increasing quantities. The specialist shops stocked these too, of course, but the department stores always made it a point to be the first in the field if they could with novelty of any kind. And the other special thing they offered the middle-class shoppers, many of whom were newly rich and a little experienced in luxury shopping, was a lavish display and wide choice of these goods.

The department stores, however, introduced into a respectable class trade the vulgar practice of openly marking or ticketing goods with their prices – a practice that had not even yet penetrated shops that could claim that they were really exclusive. But the department stores as a rule made a virtue not only of displaying their wares as openly as they could but also of boldly pricing them for all to see. Their large-scale purchases enabled them to sell cheaply and they were not ashamed in the early days to make price one of their selling points. ‘Store price’ was a by-word for cheapness.

The lines they concentrated on were fashion goods, things that shoppers were prepared to travel long distances for and to take some time and trouble in choosing. The department stores were at least partly responsible for the way the middle classes gradually became fashion conscious, and helped to mould their tastes. They were the first preachers of the modern creed that goods

ought to be replaced when they are outdated rather than when they are outworn.