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The Nation’s Chemist: A Study of the Americanisation of Boots the Chemist c.1948-1966
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The Nation’s Chemist: A Study of the Americanisation of Boots the Chemist c.1948-1966
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**Introduction:**

It’s a fortnight since Mrs. Jones went into Boots. Turning to push the familiar door she stops, stares. The shop’s gone! Well not exactly gone, but they’ve built a new one. No never. Can’t have, not in a fortnight!

That’s Quick Fit – that was! Operation Quick-Fit, a brilliantly streamlined crash programme in which our smaller shops are being speeded to their promised new look at a pace undreamed of before. Quick Fit are zipping through Towns and Cities all over the Country – you’re not the only bewildered customer Mrs. Jones!

The above extract – narrating the perplexity of a loyal Boots customer as she discovered her local pharmaceutical branch had undergone a rapid architectural transformation – was featured in Boots’ in-house magazine *The Beacon*, in 1965. Such an account typified Boots’ self-promotion of their new ‘Quick-Fit’ modernisation programme, that aimed to equip their national branches with a host of ‘modern’ shop fixtures, ranging from the re-design of their ‘shop fronts’ to the installation of new self-service ‘display units, dispensaries and light fittings.’ The innovation behind these refurbishments had been obtained by Boots managerial executives, during a number of fact-finding missions made to America in the post-war decades. Such expeditions were frequently undertaken during this period, in order to garner information on the latest retailing techniques employed by international pharmaceutical businesses, under the tutelage of American retail experts. The branches that emerged from their ‘Quick-Fit’ renovations thus embodied America’s post-war influence on Boots. The remodelled outlets offered a revolutionary form of self-service and a new expansive range of luxury merchandise for customers to choose from. The local shop that Mrs. Jones’s entered in 1965 had not vanished; it had become distinctly Americanised.

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1 ‘…Quick…Fit’, *The Beacon*, (1965), p.10.
2 ‘Let’s all dance the Quick-Fit’, *The Beacon*, (1965), p.8.
The ‘Americanisation’ of Britain is a well-established concept, that refers to the transferal of ‘selected’ and ‘adapted’ American values and customs to Britain. In the post-war period the economic and cultural manifestations of this phenomenon were magnified, following the implementation of the Marshall Plan in 1948. The programme was established by American officials, to supply financial aid to the war-shattered economies of Western Europe, with the aim of strengthening their trading partnerships abroad. Against the backdrop of the intensifying Cold War, the United States aimed to bind Western Europe to its vision of ‘American hegemony’, based upon the ideology of neo-capitalism. Britain was by far the biggest beneficiary of the grant, receiving a loan of US$2.7 billion, primarily to foster commerce between the countries. The American influence exerted on British business was thus profound.

This dissertation will explore the Americanisation of the British business sector in the post-war decades, through a case-study of Britain’s famous pharmaceutical retailer, Boots the Chemist. By focusing on the transformations within the company’s distribution and marketing strategies it will suggest that American methods of retail were adopted and adapted by the company, to meet the specific demands of the British consumer. During this period Boots was engaged in sending a number of their executive staff to America, with the aim of learning and reproducing techniques from their commercially successful counterparts abroad. In 1966 Mr. Willoughby Norman, the Boot’s Chairman, summarised America’s impact on the firm, reciting the company’s internal objectives of the past decade to ‘modernise the Boots image in terms of premises, merchandise and merchandising methods.’ This had entailed a revolution in the company’s retail distribution and marketing techniques, through the adoption of the American innovation of self-service and the expansion of a new range of luxury cosmetic goods. These transformations were applied to the company in a manner that was sensitive to local needs, in order to ensure that the company’s close relationship with their customers was maintained.

The early relationship between Boots and America
In order to understand the significance of America’s influence on Boots in the post-war decades, it is first vital to understand the chronology of their relationship. From its origins as a

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local herbalist shop in Nottingham, Boots had built up its reputation as a family-run business. Yet between 1920-1933 the enterprise was under American ownership. The initial sale of the company was prompted by Jesse Boot, following his concerns that the American retail giant ‘Rexall Pharmacies’ was poised to dominate the British pharmaceutical market. By relinquishing the firm to his American competitors, Boot sought to spare the franchise from a humiliating bankruptcy. Thus, much against the will of the company’s shareholders and Boots’ extended family, a thirteen-year American take-over ensued.

On the surface the transfer to American ownership was barely perceptible; local branches continued in their everyday running and Jesse Boot stayed on in his active role as Chairman until 1926. Nevertheless, the sale incited a comprehensive transformation within the company’s internal management structure, to imitate the American hierarchical model of organisation. Two new executive committees were formed to run the retail and manufacturing legs of the business, with John Boot appointed as the new head of retail. Through the creation of specialised departments, the company was able to devolve responsibility and improve their internal strategic co-ordination. Thus as Paul Whysall has concluded, although the American take-over was a ‘traumatic affair’ for the senior management of the firm, its overall effect proved to be greatly beneficial for the company. Indeed as John Boot declared upon the company’s return to British ownership in 1932, a ‘valuable American connection’ had been established.

The experience of the 1920s sowed the seeds for Boots’ post-war ambivalence towards America. Whilst they feared the repetition of another take-over, they had acquired a great admiration for the efficiency of the countries progressive retail techniques. Consequently, during these decades Boots continued to utilise their trans-Atlantic connections to send executives to tour American pharmaceutical facilities. From these visits employees would often produce reports to appraise the methods they had observed and recommend a suitable course of action to implement any techniques that may benefit the business. It was in this respect that the American influence exerted on the company in the post-war decades was vastly more

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informal and selective. Boots were keen to accrue the benefits of America’s efficient modes of retail whilst retaining their quintessentially British character.

**Literature**

Following on from Victoria de Grazia’s seminal study, *Irresistible Empire*, a great abundance of scholarly attention has been paid to the Americanisation of Britain in the Twentieth Century. In her illuminating work, de Grazia proposes that the formation of a US ‘market empire’ was conducive to the trans-Atlantic dissemination of American democratic ideals, that infiltrated the British market scene via its espousal of the advantages of market competition and consumer sovereignty.\(^\text{10}\) Whilst her account remains foundational to understandings of Americanisation, the sheer breadth of her research, that covers the whole of 20\textsuperscript{th} century Europe, largely limits a nuanced analysis of the specific effects on British business. This dissertation will thus employ a similar approach to the recent work of Sean Nixon, who has explored the promotion of a ‘trans-Atlantic domestic ideal’ in the post-war decades, through a concentrated study of British television advertisements. By exploring the hybridity of Anglo-American cultural influences his account diverges partially from de Grazia’s hypothesis, to suggest that American visions of domestic modernity were not whole-sale transported to Britain but were implicitly revised to create a distinctly British archetype of the modern housewife.\(^\text{11}\) Such considerations are especially poignant when constructing an historical account of the Americanisation of British retail, due to the duality of Anglo-American socio-economic influences operating on the developments of British businesses in the period.

Remarkably the sub-discipline of business history has remained a largely discrete and isolated area of study.\(^\text{12}\) As Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin have suggested, most historians engaged in business archival research still work ‘primarily within their own national frameworks’ and respective principal disciplines.\(^\text{13}\) The majority of scholarship pertaining to the post-war developments of the Americanisation of the British business sector have thus primarily conformed to two rather rigid structures; retaining a tightly analytical focus on the economic

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benefits gleaned from the transferal of American distribution techniques, or the cultural transformations centred on the British consumer in the decades of post-war affluence. Such approaches are reductive to understandings of the magnitude of the phenomenon, as they fail to appreciate the mutuality of the relationship held between the consumer and retailer. For while business enterprises remain the prime allocators of demanded products and resources, their economic trajectory is equally as influenced by the purchasing power of the consumer. The Americanisation of British retail can therefore not be dealt with in the simple parenthesis of an economic or cultural history, for the latter holds direct consequence for the former. Despite this, surprisingly little attention has been paid to uniting these methodologies.

Boots the Chemist provides an important case study to explore the intersection between post-war global ideological debates of consumerism and free market enterprise, through the lens of the British business sector. Despite holding claims to ‘Britain’s most famous retailer,’ the current literature written on Boots remains rather limited. Stanley Chapman provides the only overall narrative of the history of Boots from its inception in 1849. However his work recounts a rather myopic biography of founder Jesse Boot, chronicling his personal tribulations as Managing Director. More recent work includes that of Richard Hornsey, who has utilised the newly opened archives to construct an historical case study of Boots’ prized own-brand of cosmetics, ‘Number Seven’. Historical perspectives of the company have thus far retained an emphatic focus on Britain, despite discernible links appearing between their top business executives and American retail officials. By employing an international comparative approach, this study intends to situate the evolution of Boots in a grander globalised narrative.

This dissertation will thus aim to contribute to an emerging body of scholarship, exploring the cultural manifestations of the Cold War in Britain. In his initial publication on the subject, Tony Shaw remarked on the infancy of the theoretical field, predicting that greater understandings of the event would be gained upon the eventual release of business archives. As British retailers occupied the juncture between the worlds of mass consumerism and free

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15 Chapman, Jesse Boot of Boots the Chemists, p.9.
market enterprise, they provide the conduit through which these global debates were manifest. This remains a fairly novel idea within studies of British enterprise, however similar observations have been made about retailers in the United States. Shane Hamilton recently presented that American Supermarkets, as the physical embodiment of free enterprise, were used as propaganda tools by the US government to impress the opulence of consumer capitalism. Whilst this study does not claim to assert that Boots significantly influenced the trajectory of the Cold War, it instead aims to explore how the global debates impacted their internal practices. It is in this regard that an historical case-study of the post-war evolution of Boots the Chemist aims to provide a fresh perspective on how global diplomatic debates permeated the British high street.

Methodology
This dissertation has greatly benefited from the company archival records of the Walgreens Boots Alliance (WBA), that recently became available to the public via the launch of their online catalogue in May 2017. Comprising a collation of over ‘500,000 items’ the archive aims to chronicle the evolution of Britain’s famous pharmaceutical retailer, from its establishment in 1849. The catalogue consists of a medley of resources, including in-house staff magazines, company annual reports, national advertising campaigns and staff-training initiatives. These sources provide a valuable insight into the company’s economic developments and their broader commercial interests. Therefore, in order to construct a detailed socio-economic analysis of Boots, an array of this primary source material has been utilised.

Business archives have often been approached with a degree of scepticism, due to apprehensions that they are too self-serving and lack objectivity. Stephanie Decker has cautioned their use, claiming that an over-reliance on company records can lead to ‘silences’ entering historical accounts. She attributes this to a process of ‘weeding’, in which business archivists can often discard significant material or alternatively hoard too many records. In both cases, an over-abundance or scarcity of primary sources can make it difficult for the historian to cohesively analyse the archival material. As the Boots archive is in its first stage

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2 Greenwood and Ingram, ‘Sources and Resources’, p. 857.
of publication, there remains an archival deficit. The minutes of the company’s meetings
remain unavailable and it is unclear in some cases if specific reports from America still exist.
In order to combat any potential bias or an over-reliance on certain documents that this may
have caused, this study has aimed to contextualise the Boots material using a wealth of
secondary and more general primary sources. Here the online collections of ‘Atlee’s Britain’
and ‘Fifties Britain’ from the National Archives have proved invaluable.

It is also necessary to recognise the potential limitations of the individual sources themselves.
This dissertation relies on extracts from the company’s in-house magazines, The Bee, The
Beacon and The Mixture. These periodicals were published monthly in the post-war decades,
to document significant events within the company and promote future plans for the expansion
of the business. As Simon Phillips has indicated, the magazines were disseminated amongst
retail employees to act as soft internal propaganda for the firm. Therefore articles were often
framed to highlight initiatives to improve staff welfare and customer service, in order to
demonstrate the company’s ‘corporate soul.’22 Nevertheless, as this study does not seek to
provide a critical analysis of the ethical practices of the company, these sources still hold great
value. In fact, they prove to be particularly useful in signalling the company’s broader
ideological stance and attitude toward America. Henceforth, as John Griffiths has argued, the
in-house journals provide a critical ‘metaphorical window’ in which to explore the company’s
perception of themselves.23

This dissertation comprises three chapters. The first chapter will propose that Boots’
introduction of the American retail innovation of self-service aided to disseminate American
ideas for improving productivity, by proposing a more efficient utilisation of labour and
increased opportunities for the sale of goods. The second chapter will argue that the company
was forced to adapt to the transforming consumer demands for luxury that had arisen in the
emergent affluent society of Fifties Britain. Faced with an influx of competition from popular
American cosmetic brands, the company adopted many of their overseas competitors
marketing techniques, to develop their own range of British-made luxurious cosmetics, that
could cater for the housewives burgeoning desires for Hollywood glamour whilst retaining a

22 S. Phillips, ‘Chemists to the Nation’: House Magazines, Locality and Health at Boots the Chemists 1919-
23 J. Griffiths, ‘Give my regards to Uncle Billy…’: The rites and rituals of company life at Lever Brothers,
sense of British modesty. The third chapter will seek to explore how the company navigated their dual remit to supply medical prescriptions for the newly emergent National Health Service and operate their own commercial pharmaceutical enterprise. Within the context of global ideological debates about consumerism and free market enterprise, it will argue that Boots occupied a hybrid position between American visions of a free market enterprise and a socialist model of state control.
Chapter 1: Productivity

‘Branch 1033a is unique, not only among Boots shops, but among all chemists in the country. It is the only one, so far as we know, where the principle of self-service operates.’

Self-service was first introduced to Boots in 1951, in the small suburban branch of Burnt Oak, Edgware. Following numerous reports made by Boots executives of its widespread success in America, the retail technology was adopted by the company, as a means to reduce their internal distribution costs. By transferring greater responsibility to the customer to select their own goods, from newly constructed aisles of open display cabinets, the system offered a more expedient mode of shopping. The early transition to a less personnel-intensive form of service actualised the company’s broader internal objectives to increase productivity. Boots’ pioneering establishment of self-service thus provides an insight into the process of Americanisation, demonstrating both how and why American ideas were adopted by retailers and adapted to local conditions in Britain. The implementation of US methods of distribution can be viewed as part of the broader initiative to deploy the American ideology of the ‘politics of productivity.’ These ideals heavily influenced Boots, as the Managing Director, Arthur Cockfield, attested in 1962; ‘increased productivity is imperative.’

In the post-war period, the issue of industrial ‘productivity’ became increasingly salient within British political debate, due to concerns over the country’s dire economic decline. Following the end of the Second World War, Britain had emerged harbouring debts of over £1 billion and an acute shortage of ‘raw materials’, that saw rationing continue until 1954. It was in light of the county’s persisting balance of payments deficit and the scarcity of essential commodities, that focus centred on the need for British industry to increase their general output. Within the constraints of the Labour government’s dogged agenda to maintain full employment, increased

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productivity could only be achieved by a ‘better utilisation of the labour force.’ Consequently in 1948 the Anglo-American Productivity Council was established, under the co-joint initiative of British Chancellor of the Exchequer, Sir Stafford Cripps and Marshall Plan administrator, Paul Hoffman. Comprising the most ‘visible activity’ of Marshall Aid, the Council aimed to send the top representatives of British industry to the United States, to procure information on the latest American methods of production. Over the course of its four year life-span, the programme sent a total of 900 British agents to tour American ‘expert’ retail facilities. From its initial aims to obtain practical information to reconstruct industry the missions transformed into an attempt to disseminate America’s ‘productivity conscious’ approach to British industrialists.

It is within this grander context that we can begin to understand the financial motivations behind Boots’ push for increased productivity. Emerging from the Second World War Boots’ financial situation mirrored many of the economic problems present in the British economy at large. Having supplied the British and allied governments with ‘six billion medicinal tablets’ in 1944 alone, the company faced a severe accumulation of economic and inventory losses. These commercial pressures were not relieved at the conclusion of the conflict, as in 1948 they were further mandated to supply prescriptions for the newly established National Health Service and thus lost the advantage of having lower dispensing prices than its competitors. Leading into the 1950s the company’s ‘retained profits’ had fallen by £100,000. It was in respect of their monetary losses that Boots turned their attention to increasing the productivity of their distribution practises. In an effort to reassure the company’s shareholders of their future economic viability, a bold pledge was made to ‘concentrate upon increased efficiency.’

Boots thus emulated the government’s desires to improve industrial productivity. Despite this, the company never participated in any of the relevant Anglo-American Productivity Councils, initiated under Marshall Aid. There remains a degree of ambiguity as to why Boots were not

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33 ‘The National Health Service’, (1948), The Boots Archive, accessed online [WBA/BT/11/38/2/8]
34 Chapman, *Jesse Boot of Boots the Chemists*, p.196.
involved in the programme, as many of their national competitors were engaged in the trans-Atlantic expeditions. In 1951 a council of representatives from the pharmaceutical industry travelled to study methods of specialised drug manufacturing and in 1952 a council of high street retailers were sent to study techniques of sales and merchandising. As one of Britain’s leading pharmaceutical retailers, their participation would have perhaps been expected. Indeed the company appear to have been supportive of other government initiatives, as shown in 1962 when their Managing Director, Arthur Cockfield, was appointed to the newly established board for economic planning, popularly known as ‘NEDDY.’ Their absence from the Anglo-American Productivity Council’s programme can perhaps in part be understood due to Boots’ underlying anxieties over America’s imposing economic dominance. In 1950 they warned against hinging the Nation’s finances on the ‘statesmanlike munificence of another country’ whose ‘policy may well be modified by political, economic and military considerations which cannot be foreseen.’ Although they did not explicitly refer to the Marshall Plan, it is clear from the Chairman’s records that they feared the financial vulnerability that may be fostered through American aid.

Nevertheless, the company remained receptive to the inflow of American ideas and sought to establish their own productivity missions, emulating the national initiatives on a more localised level. Evidence of this can be seen through their connection with the formation of the Nottingham Roosevelt Memorial Travel Scholarship, that was established in 1946 to honour the war-time US President. The trustees of this scholarship, which included in their number Lord Trent the chairman of Boots, aimed to send young individuals from Nottingham to tour American retail facilities and in the words of Eleanor Roosevelt, to ‘study American Business and American life.’ Dennis Greensmith, an employee from Boots, became the first beneficiary of the grant in 1949. He was succeeded by a number of Boots employees over this period, such as Alan Quayle who boarded the Queen Mary in 1965 to investigate and report on the organisation of American chain stores. Running in parallel to these sponsored trips were independent expeditions organised internally within Boots. The most documented of these

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“Photograph of Anglo-American Productivity Team from Moss Chemists’, (February 1952), [WBA/AH/AUC/EM/7/4/19]


remains a visit made by three managerial executives in 1962 to attend the Modern Merchandising Methods seminar, run by the American “guru of retail” Bernardo Trujillo. As Tristan Jacques has argued, the conference constituted the ‘equivalent of the productivity missions for distributive trades.’ 41 Certainly, following the executives return they recommended that a course of ‘efficient discounting’ be implemented to keep ‘pace with developments’ in the United States. 42

Based upon the recommendations of various reports written from visits to America, Boots came to employ the ‘low-cost distribution’ model of self-service. 43 The paradigm of self-selection had first gained traction amongst American food retailers in the inter-war period. 44 As it required customers to take a more ‘active role in the exchange process’, the method proposed a transparent means to save staff time and reduce internal costs. 45 Despite this, by 1947 there were only ten self-service outlets in Britain. 46 The novelty of the system was clear to see, as for part of its introduction to Boots in 1951 the technology had to be explained to staff in layman’s terms:

‘On entering the shop, the customer takes a basket from the rack situated on the right hand side ‘as you go in’ and then helps himself (or herself) to the goods on display.’ 47

The innovation proposed to transform the process of transaction. Indeed as Barbara Usherwood has suggested it provoked a ‘minor revolution’ in the habitual shopping patterns of the housewife. 48

The spatial management of shop premises was now considered to be of great significance to aid the flow of customers around the newly constructed aisles of open display cabinets. Given that ‘customer traffic’ was now heralded as the prime determinant of sales figures, it was vital

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43 Dickson, Millwood and Cargill, ‘Modern Merchandising Methods’, p.36.
44 Hamilton, Supermarket USA: Food and Power in the Cold War Farms Race, p.17.
47 ‘An Experiment in Selling’, p.2.
that branches were able to cater for the increased movement of shoppers. In 1958 Boots announced the creation of their new ‘Shop Planning’ department, under the authority of Mr. A. D. Spencer. The programme was supplied with £10 million to ‘modernise’ the layout of their branches, in conjunction with the ‘best shop-planning ideas gleaned by architects during many visits to America’. The renovations were designed with ‘wider gangways’ and ‘increased sales areas’ to facilitate customer circulation and relieve congestion. New ‘illuminated signs’ also adorned the walls, to give ‘quick identification’ to the different departments. Given the unfamiliarity of the practise, the physical transformations of the premises was necessary to direct customers to engage in the process of self-selection. As Cockfield pithily summarised in 1962, ‘our shops will succeed in proportion to the number of people we can get moving through them.’

The introduction of self-service was pitched to Boots’ retail executives as a more ‘economical use of staff’, in keeping with the company’s broader desires to improve productivity. Firstly, by transferring greater responsibility to the customer to select their own goods, from newly constructed aisles of open display cabinets, the system offered a more efficient method to process sales in the ‘new era of quick, convenient shopping.’ Secondly, by freeing staff from the drudgery of collecting merchandise from the stockroom, the sales assistant now had more time to focus on pre-packaging goods and processing sales. As a report on merchandising made clear, the transition meant that ‘fewer staff per square foot of selling space’ was needed. The final benefit to be gained from the introduction of self-service was the increased prospects of sales offered by the open display cabinets. As it was now thought that customers would be more inclined to purchase goods they could physically see and handle, Boots sought to capitalise on the opportunity to conveniently display a wider range of merchandise. Indeed as one report from America damningly stated, ‘stockrooms’ were the equivalent of ‘cemeteries for goods’. Special attention was thus given to the arrangement of merchandise, in order to try

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* ‘Stevenage (Branch 1808)’, p.10.
* Cockfield, ‘Counter is the Starting Point’, p.13.
* ‘Introduction of Self Selection at Branch 360’, *Sales and Selling*, 1(42), (1962), p.46.
* ‘Let’s All Dance the Quick-Fit’, *The Beacon*, (1965), p.9.
* Dickson, Millwood and Cargill, ‘Modern Merchandising Methods’, p.32.
and spark ‘impulse buys.’ By placing the most ‘demanded’ items at ‘eye-level’, with the ‘slower sellers on the lower shelves’, the pharmacy hoped to compel customers to purchase ‘goods which they would have bought elsewhere’. Statistical gurus of the company were keen to impress upon their shareholders the rapid success of the innovation. In 1962 they reported that after the ‘conversion’ of one of their branches, the shop had benefited from an ‘8 per cent’ increase in sales over the year prior.

Nevertheless, it must here be noted that the adoption of self-service to Britain did not proceed in a linear trajectory because as many commentators have pointed out, it was at first heavily resisted by British consumers. As Paul du Gay has argued, the individualised ethos of self-service did not translate to liberty in the mind of the British consumer, as it did in America. Upon its first implementation to a Tesco Supermarket in 1947, the shop had to return to the old model of full-service amid complaints from housewives that they were being forced to perform the work for free that had previously been undertaken for them by the sales assistant. Boots were indeed aware of this, as they noted that American consumers were more ‘deeply conditioned’ to self-service than was typically the case in Britain.

In the case of Boots, resistance to the introduction of self-service lay not only amongst individual customers who had become accustomed to the exclusivity of personal assistance, but also within the wider community of chemists. In 1952 Boots were taken to court by the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, who claimed that the innate principles of self-service threatened the integrity of the pharmaceutical profession. According to the plaintiff the customer’s freedom to peruse open aisles of proprietary medicines, without the supervision of a ‘registered pharmacist’ jeopardised their safety. Although the society lost the case, their accusations attested to a widely held concern that the company’s commercial interests had overtaken their sense of duty to provide quality health care for their customers.

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* ‘An Experiment in Selling’, p.2.
* ‘Introduction of Self Selection at Branch 360’, p.45.
Boots remained plainly aware that success of their sales innovation was contingent on the cooperation of the British consumer. The company was thus keen to encourage support for the transition to self-selection by reassuring their customers that delivering quality service remained their top priority. In the first introduction of the system, the operation was framed to the locals of Burnt Oak as an ‘experiment’, to see if it was ‘practicable’ to accrue the benefits of the low-cost distribution model without ‘sacrificing any of the traditional standards’ of the British chemist. Rather than one-sidedly imposing the alien model of self-selection, Boots stressed their empathy to respond to the feedback of their local patrons.

Fig. 1: ‘Building for The Future’, *A Review of Activities*, (1960), The Boots Archive, [WBA/BT/11/30/10], p.6.

* An Experiment in Selling*, p.2.
Whilst the company applied the practice of self-selection to merchandise that did not require any expert assistance, they maintained their attention to personal service in the realm of medical care. Furthermore, as Richard Hornsey has proposed, the cosmetics counters still relied heavily on the ‘theatricality of the expert toilet assistant’ to promote sales.\(^6\) Boots claimed to have struck a balance between the two systems of service [Fig.1]. In an effort to preserve their ethical image, the company assured customers that the movement towards self-selection, demanded ‘more not less experience and knowledge’ from the staff.\(^7\) By releasing staff from attending to less important duties, they could now focus on giving their ‘full attention to customers who need their help and attention.’\(^8\) Both staff and customers alike would benefit from the convenience offered by this new form of service.

Boots early transition to a less personnel-intensive form of service actualised the company’s objective to increase productivity from 1951 onwards. Following the positive feedback from the Boots executives of its success across America, the retail technology was widely adopted by the company, as a means to reduce their internal distribution costs and pose a more efficient use of staff. With Boots continued emphasis on service by both qualified chemists and beauty advisors, the modified paradigm of self-selection that ensued can thus be viewed as an adaptation of the American distribution technique that would elicit the cooperation of the British consumer and was thus well adapted to local conditions. By 1966 the company’s accounts and summary of business for the year ended 31 March reported that a ten-year plan to modernise Boots premises had been successfully ‘welcomed by staff and customers alike’, with the vast majority of shops having completed their conversion via the company’s ‘quick-fit’ programme.\(^9\)

\(^7\) ‘Staff’, Boots Company Annual Reports, (1962), p.16
\(^8\) ‘Building for The Future’, p.8.
Chapter 2: Consumerism

‘The National income is growing, the standard of living is rising, people have more money to spend. Commodities that were the luxuries of yesterday have become the necessities of today.’

By the end of the 1950s, Boots had recognised the need to supply for consumer’s burgeoning demands for luxury. Challenged by the increased competition of popular American cosmetic goods that flooded the British market place, the company aimed to rebrand their much-loved cosmetics range, Number Seven Beauty Preparations. Their new merchandising and marketing campaigns focussed on the growing market sector of affluent women, seeking to appeal to ‘real women’ in a range of social settings. Given the rising allure of Hollywood glamour, Boots aimed to adapt American techniques of merchandising to create a product campaign that would offer women affordable luxury whilst retaining its British characteristics.

Fifties Britain was marked by a decade of unprecedented affluence, that saw a rise in the material living standards of many families across the country. Prompted by the end of austerity and a steady increase in average wages after the war, people had more disposable income to spend on a plethora of material goods. This transformation in society was encapsulated by the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan in 1957, when he famously remarked ‘most of our people have never had it so good.’ The prosperity he alluded to was driven by this renewed enthusiasm for consumption. As Dominik Sandbrook has suggested, most people were more interested in shopping than worrying about the bitter infighting between political parties or rising tensions of the Cold War. Married women in particular, following their increased numbers entering paid employment, were credited with fuelling the main expenditure on luxury goods. Between 1951 to 1961 their numbers rose from 21.7 per cent to 45.5 per cent. It was these women’s wages that underpinned the consumer-boom.

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* Sandbrook, Never Had It So Good.

America had a profound effect on the development of the consumer society in modern Britain. As John Lyons has argued, the promotion of free trade, encouraged by the Marshall Plan, enabled an influx of American products to infiltrate the British market scene. In addition, the popularisation of American modes of entertainment, such as Hollywood cinema and fashion, had impacted the desires of the British consumer. Aptly, he suggests that the ‘sophisticated elegance of Max factor cosmetics tempted women to believe that they could share the glamour of Hollywood.’ The saturation of American consumables had a direct impact on the marketing strategies of British business. As James Obelkevich has illustrated, from operating in a ‘production-orientated’ market, where demand had far out-stripped supply during the years of austerity, companies now faced an influx of foreign goods, vying for consumer’s allegiance. This saw the birth of a ‘consumer-orientated’ market, where companies undertook market research to cater specifically for the innermost desires of their customers.

Boots was heavily influenced by these changing patterns of consumption. As an internal report remarked, Hollywood had exported a ‘distorted’ beauty ideal to British women, who aspired to emulate the glamour of their on-screen heroines. To meet this demand in the post-war period the company had come to stock many of these American cosmetic brands in their own shops. Thus Boots faced the dual impacts of increased competition and the transforming demands of the female consumer. As early as 1950 the chairman announced that with the astounding ‘success’ of these American imports, the Boots brand would have to revise their own marketing strategy, to imitate the trans-Atlantic approach. As these overseas products, such as Max Factor, relied on ‘easily pronounced and remembered brands names’, in order for Boots to ‘compete’ with them effectively, it was ‘plainly necessary to do the same’. The intensity of American competition within the cosmetics market was such that Boots were forced to radically change their approach towards marketing, in order to harness the purchasing power of the British housewife.

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76 Lyons, America in the British Imagination, p.10.
The rise of mass consumerism in post-war Britain was greeted with great ambivalence. Whilst many individuals revelled in the affordability of new luxury goods available on the market, a number of contemporary critics feared that the influx of American products would lead to Britain’s social and economic decline. This was due to concerns that the prevalence of cheap, commercial goods would encourage traits of individualism and hedonism and drive British enterprise out of business. Indeed Peter Gurney has suggested that the debate over the ‘morality’ of consumer culture in Britain was socially and politically divisive. In the social allegory aptly titled, *The American Take-Over of Britain*, James McMillan and Bernard Harris alluded to wider public anxieties held around the material physicality of America’s dominance in Britain. In the anxiety-provoking first chapter, they recounted the fictional diary of ‘Mrs John Bull’ - a political caricature rife in the British national imagination as the personification of English tradition. Throughout her morning, Mrs Bulls’ routine was directed by her exclusive use of American brands; ‘7a.m. My Westclox alarm rings. Rouse John; lay out his shaving things: Gillette razor, Personna blade, Colgate shaving stick’. Her obsession with American consumables was presumed to be symptomatic of the nation’s inadvertent submission to American commercialisation. ‘Max Factor’, the popular American cosmetics brand stocked by Boots, was ominously listed amongst the infamous American trademarks credited with the ‘dirge of [British] culture’. Given the specific reference to the American merchandise sold by Boots, the company found itself on the front-line of this National debate.

Boots responded to these concerns by developing a new range of British-made luxurious and affordable beauty products, that were targeted at the lucrative market sector of young-married women. Whilst the company had built up its reputation as a quintessentially British brand, they recognised that many of their customers were still ‘influenced by these trends’ being brought over from America. They thus sought to dually cater for both the expanding demands of glamour and to curb criticisms over American commercialisation. In May 1952, they relaunched their esteemed beauty cosmetics range, Number Seven, with a new opulent aesthetic. The new products were designed with ‘honey-and-gold’ plastic packaging, in order to visibly express an aura of sophistication and glamour, to match the ‘growing demand’ for ‘elegant products’ which were ‘packaged attractively’.

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* Dickson, Millwood and Cargill, ‘Modern Merchandising Methods’, p.36.
following the advice of Phyllis Digby, an expert in women’s beauty psychology, to create a brand that was suitably glamorous but not narcissistic. Having edited the life-style magazine *Woman and Beauty* and appeared regularly on the BBC’s talk show ‘Women’s Hour’, she proved to be a qualified candidate to guide the company on women’s innermost desires. The brand’s revamp sought to find a middle ground between British women’s burgeoning desires for Hollywood-style and the limits of social acceptableness.

The fulfilment of these dual demands can be seen in the advertisements for their new range of Number Seven ‘beauty preparations.’ Prior to its launch, the new advertising strategy was described to staff on the basis of its democratic ethos:

*The Number Seven Story is the story of you and me and women like us – saleswomen, secretaries, young married women, and ‘teenagers.’ In each advertisement a real woman speaks – there is a photograph of her in her ‘everyday’ dress telling us her story and how the ‘NEW, better, and lovelier’ Number Seven beauty preparations solved her complexion problems.*

The marketing campaign was constructed to appeal to the everyday woman, to highlight the ease in which she could perfect her appearance, even throughout the working day. In one advertisement that typified Boots’ approach, a young-married woman was pictured holding her wedding photograph, staring longingly into the distance asking herself, ‘would he still marry me again?’ [Fig.2] Upon discovering the ‘miracle’ of Number Seven’s beauty preparations, her fears were allayed as she was able to retain her youthful appearance. As Sean Nixon has argued the archetype of the young married housewife, ‘above average attractiveness without being too glamorous’ was prevalent in many British advertisements of this period: The image hoped to denote an aura of glamour, through the women’s fashionably upswept hair and sartorial appearance, yet retain a sense of relatability by referring to her daily challenges of motherhood. By framing the woman’s concerns for her ‘complexion’ in terms of her desire to maintain her husband’s affection, as opposed to vanity, the brand sought to mitigate concerns over the materialism and narcissism that come to be associated with cosmetics. The Number Seven

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*‘Building for the Future’, p.10.*
narrative offered a means for women to obtain luxury in the new consumer-driven society, whilst retaining a British sense of modesty.

Fig. 2: ‘Would he marry me again?’, Magazine Advertisement, (1953), The Boots Archive, [WBA/BT/11/45/2/83].
Chapter 3: The Nation’s Chemist

‘In Service to the Nation’

From the company’s early establishment in 1849, Boots had endeavoured to forge a close relationship with the Nation, as Britain’s trusted supplier of quality pharmaceutical goods. Jesse Boot in particular, following his inheritance of the familial enterprise, had been religiously motivated to pursue a form of ‘philanthropic retailing,’ that sought to extend the sale of patent medicines to a new set of working-class associations. By employing a business model to buy raw materials in bulk and then manufacture and distribute drugs at competitive prices, the company pledged to make quality pharmaceutical products available to all classes of customer. ‘Competition’ became a central component to the company’s business strategy, to ensure that they fulfilled their ethos to provide quality medical healthcare to all classes of British citizens. In the post-war period the company’s provision over the Nation’s pharmaceutical needs was extended, as they were tasked with supplying ‘one seventh of the prescriptions’ issued under the newly emergent National Health Service. Boots thus occupied a rather unique position, as they came to dispense drugs both for their own commercial profits as a free enterprise and to provide for the government’s national monopoly of free healthcare. Throughout, their top priority remained to retain their position as ‘Chemist to the Nation’, by providing the best service possible for their customers, in line with their company slogans of ‘Boots for Value’ and ‘Boots for Service.’

In the midst of the Cold War, ‘consumer sovereignty’ and debates about the optimum means by which the state could best service its citizens became highly politicised concepts. Whilst the Soviet Union claimed a higher standard of living for its citizens based on a utopian model of collectivism, the United States praised the liberal merits of free enterprise as the prime allocator of resources. The ideological conflict that ensued was represented in the famous ‘kitchen debate’ that occurred between Vice-President Richard Nixon and Premier Nikita

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*In Service to the Nation*, *The Bee*, (1965), p.2.


Khrushchev at the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Stood in front of an American ranch-style Kitchen, fitted with a host of ‘household consumer durables’, Nixon glorified the creed of consumer capitalism for providing its citizens with the latest technological advancements. A lesser known aspect of the fair, was the display of an American self-service supermarket. Exhibit planners employed women to push trolleys down aisles of pre-packaged food goods, to highlight the ease with which ordinary citizens could obtain an abundance of consumables. As an internal memo from the exhibit stated, the presentation hoped to ‘undermine’ the Soviet’s confidence in Communism to provide the basic necessities for its citizens. With retail innovations such as self-service, American citizens had convenient access to a plethora of cheap luxury goods. Free enterprise was thus hailed by American officials as the vanguard of social progress.

The model of consumer capitalism that ensued in Britain was an adaptation of America’s vision of free market enterprise. As Shane Hamilton has suggested, ‘selling’ the dream of democratic consumption became a ‘central component’ of America’s Cold War strategy. However, despite Britain’s close alignment with the United States, the doctrine of free market supremacy remained highly contested within parliamentary debate. The Attlee government, following the turmoil of war, pressed for a more socialist vision of British citizenship, orchestrating the formation of the Welfare State to provide universal healthcare from “cradle to the grave”. As Lawrence Black has discussed, the Labour party remained apprehensive towards the rise of mass consumerism, for concerns that it encouraged individualistic materialism. This was shown in 1953, when Aneurin Bevan remarked that advertising was ‘one of the most evil consequences of modern society’. Churchill opposed such views, presenting the dichotomy between the ‘dead hand of the monopoly and the stimulus of competition.’ However, it must be noted that despite condemning state intervention, his successive Conservative government never dismantled the model of Nationalised healthcare. As Victoria de Grazia has stated, the British ‘citizen-consumer’ that emerged was thus a ‘hybrid’, aided by both the security of the Welfare State and the ‘freedoms’ promised by the free market.

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*Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, pp.84,106.

*Hamilton, *Supermarket USA*, p.86.


*de Grazia, *Irresistible Empire*, p.343.*
Boots embodied this hybrid approach, given their dual remit to supply for the emergent National Health Service and provide pharmaceutical and cosmetic goods as an independent retailer. However their priority remained to deliver quality healthcare, as they reassured their customers that they would ‘always be a chemist first.’ Therefore, throughout their venture to supply prescriptions for the National Health Service the company remained primarily concerned with the quality of medical assistance offered in their own individual branches. It is clear that on a humanitarian level Boots supported the philosophy of universal healthcare, proclaiming it ‘the greatest single occurrence in our history.’ However within time the financial obligations proved to be incompatible with their own commercial agenda. In private Boots executives expressed a profound frustration with the innate economic inefficiency of the National monopoly, that they claimed was driving the enterprise out of competitive business. In the company’s internal reports, the National Health Service received very little attention, apart from an annual tally to record the debts owed to them by the National Health authorities. In 1953 they recounted this figure to exceed over ‘£1,000,000’, with miniscule prospects of a full reimbursement. The cumulative financial drain on the company’s balance sheet impacted directly on the services Boots were able to provide for their customers. In 1963 executives complained that the ‘reduced rates of remuneration for dispensing’ that had been imposed by the National Health Minister, had forced them to terminate the ‘Night Service’ run at a number of their branches. The company’s broader commitment to supply for the State monopoly had interfered with the quality of service individual Boots branches were able to offer their local customers.

Significantly more pressing for the enterprise, was the detrimental effects that the state monopoly was having on the company’s future medical research. With the advent of nationalised prescriptions, that saw a mounting pressure placed upon doctors to prescribe ‘proprietary’ medicines from a list of official publications, the company was increasingly stymied from selling their own-brand goods. In 1953 they remarked that with the State as their ‘main buyer’, the opportunities to recover profit from their own ‘named-products’ were increasingly limited. Without significant financial returns, Boots could not afford to continue

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102 ‘The National Health Service’, (1948), accessed online [WBA/BT/11/38/2/8]
to invest money into research. According to executives, the State monopoly was thus stifling the future prospects of British medical research. In 1965 they noted that this ‘disturbing trend’ to reduce expenditure was putting the British pharmaceutical industry at a distinct disadvantage to their overseas competitors, namely ‘America’.

Paradoxically, in an effort to provide free medical healthcare to all British citizens, the State monopoly was inadvertently harming the advancement of medical breakthroughs.

Ultimately Boots emphasised the importance of maintaining free market competition within the pharmaceutical industry, in order to ensure that high quality standards of service and production were met. Hence in an effort to accentuate the significance of their role as a free enterprise, a number of analogies were drawn between the totalitarian regime of Soviet Union and the nationalisation of Britain’s health service in the company’s internal publications for staff. Upon a visit to Russia made by a Boots employee he remarked that, ‘Soviet pharmacists are apathetic about the sale of anything but essentials.’ With the removal of profit motives within the dispensing business, he claimed that the socialist utopia was failing to provide anything for its citizens beyond the bare necessities. One ‘Muscovite’ had become so desperate with the situation that he ‘tried to buy [his] shoes off his feet.’

In addition another damning report written by the expert anatomist Edward Gurr, to compare the quality of medical care available under the Communist system, was published in the Boots in-house magazine Sales and Selling. From travelling around a number of Soviet chemist's he concluded that the government’s exclusive ownership over all ‘pharmaceutical concerns’ had led to a dearth of quality drugs available. Lack of ‘competition’ and an aversion to ‘advertising’ had driven the price of essential commodities up and halted the progression of medical research. Soviet citizens had to wait in ‘very long’ queues to be recommended prescriptions from a ‘meagre variety of remedies officially supplied’.

The reprinted article in the Boots journal attested to the company’s underlying concerns over the government’s increasing influence within the pharmaceutical sector. An exclusive reliance on the State as the sole allocator of medical assistance could compromise the overall quality of health care available for British citizens and stifle innovation within the pharmaceutical sector. Thus they emphasised the need to maintain their position as an independent pharmaceutical retailer.

— E. Gurr, ‘Going to a Chemists in Russia’, Sales and Selling, 1(35), (1961), p.3.
Boots continued to extol the virtues of free enterprise – with its tenets of competition and individual autonomy – as the optimum allocator of quality goods and services. Harking back to their roots as a philanthropic retailer, Boots saw free enterprise as the prime means to provide the best service, quality goods and research funding for new breakthroughs in the field of pharmacy. This can perhaps be viewed as part of the company’s broader justification for seeking to run a profitable chemists’ business in the new era of free healthcare. Indeed as Gurr concluded in his final statement when he visited the impoverished pharmacies that existed under the Soviet system in 1961; ‘this pharmacy under free enterprise, we take it for granted.’

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Gurr, ‘Going to a Chemists in Russia’, p.3.
**Conclusion**

As the report written by the three Boots executives who attended the Modern Merchandising Methods Seminar in 1962 concluded,

*This company has moved successfully through the post-war period by adjusting to changes as they occurred. We have already adopted and adapted some of the newer techniques of lower-cost retail distribution to our own branches and made real progress in this direction.*

*Nevertheless, we are approaching another period of basic change in retailing and, while not departing from merchandising policies which have made this company one of the leading retailers in Britain, it is important to recognise the necessity for keeping pace with developments.*

This summary encapsulated the company’s debt to Americanisation during the period from 1948 to 1966, throughout which there were rapid changes to British society as a result of the transition from post war austerity to a period of unprecedented growth and affluence, as well as the influence of American ideals of free market capitalism and the sovereignty of the consumer.

Following Boots’ thirteen-year American ownership in the 1920s, the company had acquired a great respect for American retail techniques. In the post-war decades they continued to utilise their valuable connections to establish their own equivalent to the national ‘productivity missions’, that allowed the company to directly learn from American retail experts and import their progressive retail ideas in order to improve the company’s productivity and merchandising strategies. In 1951 Boots pioneered the adoption of the American retail innovation of self-service in order to reduce internal distribution costs and encourage sales-led growth. This process, which can be viewed a part of the broader initiative to deploy the ‘American ideology of productivism’, enabled Boots to remain competitive in order to survive the ‘difficult times’ of the 1950s, by offering a revolutionary form of low-cost distribution and expanding the company’s product range to meet the demands of consumers who sought

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110 Dickson, Millwood and Cargill, ‘Modern Merchandising Methods’, p.36.
affordable luxury and convenience. Faced with the competition from American imported goods that were popular in the British marketplace and the rapidly transforming demands from British consumers, Boots also adopted many of their American competitors merchandising and marketing techniques. By creating new product ranges and packaging that catered to the new demands from British women for opulence, the company played a part in importing idealised notions of Hollywood glamour to Britain.

Boots sought to cater to a uniquely British consumer who remained ambivalent towards the effects of Americanisation on society. Since many consumers in Britain were equally dismayed and bewildered by the disappearance of a familiar British shopping experience as well as a dislike of the ideals of American individualism and hedonism, Boots sought to adapt by providing a locally acceptable idiom. In order to retain a close connection with customers, many of whom were resistant to the individualised ethos of self-service, Boots adapted the model to Britain by focussing more on providing shoppers with personal service. The company also rebranded their much loved own British-made Number Seven range to appeal to a distinctly British archetype of the modern housewife, whose increased independence and purchasing power allowed her to access the American ideal of luxury at affordable prices for all. This allowed Boots both to cater for the growing allure of Hollywood glamour and to curb anxieties of an American take-over.

Situating the evolution of Boots in grander globalised narratives of the Cold War, it is evident that the company’s unusual hybrid position as a supplier to both a state run monopoly and a free market enterprise to some extent compromised their commercial competitive advantage and ability to serve their customers as ‘The Chemist to the Nation.’ The company’s responsibility to dispense medicine for the National Health Service had a negative impact on it’s profits which consequently stymied their ability to invest in research to advance progress in the field of pharmacy. Inadvertently, this came to place them at the juncture of the global Cold War ideological debate between American espousals of the democratic merits of free market competition and the Soviet’s vision of a socialist utopia. Given the burdening financial pressures that were imposed on the company by the national monopoly, they came to champion the necessities of retaining commercially competitive pharmaceutical retailers in Britain, in

order to ensure that quality service and medical healthcare could be afforded to all British citizens.

American models of retail were thus adopted and adapted by Boots to allow them to keep pace with the developments of changing conditions and to retain their reputable positions as ‘The Nation’s Chemist’ which they enjoy to the present day with a visible presence on every high street in Britain.
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List of Illustrations

Fig. 1: ‘Building for The Future’, A Review of Activities, (1960), The Boots Archive, [WBA/BT/11/30/10].

Fig. 2: ‘Would he marry me again?’, Magazine Advertisement, (1953), The Boots Archive, [WBA/BT/11/45/2/83].

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