

CHAPTER 1

An Orphan in Oxford Street



John Lewis in his thirties.



Eliza Baker in her twenties.

His was a fine store and did a remarkable trade. Most drapers work to a 33% profit on selling price, which is 50% on cost. John Lewis worked to 25% on selling price and insisted that the public should get the advantage of a good purchase by his buyers ... John Lewis saved on his overheads and he did not advertise. He was a remarkable man ... who stood there like a gnarled old oak, representing much of the worst type of employer in the rugged, rather shameless, individualist past of the Victorian and Edwardian era.

PHILIP HOFFMAN, IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY *THEY ALSO SERVE*, 1948

The business that eventually developed into the John Lewis Partnership started slowly. On its first day in April 1864 John Lewis's rented shop at 132 Oxford Street made just 16s 4d, worth about £75 today: sixteen shillings and four pence in the old British currency, whose addition and subtraction caused such misery to a nation of school children. John, now twenty-eight, had been earning about that sum each day as a buyer of silk fabrics for the draper Peter Robinson on the other side of Oxford Circus. His old employer was now his rival. For a time the newly independent John Lewis struggled, but after a few months he decided to buy a job lot of silks, and sell it at a seductively low price. Customers arrived, returned with their friends, and the word went round. John Lewis's name was made. So who was he?

A Family of Orphans

John Lewis was born in 1836 in Shepton Mallet, the sleepy Somerset market town whose steadily diminishing wealth had originally been built on wool. Near the market square his father John ran a bakery, and John junior was the fifth of six children born to the baker and his wife Elizabeth Speed. The Speeds were an extended Shepton family of shopkeepers, of grocers and brewers, basket makers and milliners, and their support was called on when the mother of the Lewis family died, followed two years later by the father. The six Lewis children were in desperate need of help. In 1843 when they were orphaned Elizabeth was seventeen, probably at home with her four sisters – Maria was thirteen, Ann eleven, Mary nine, and Eliza five. John was the single boy, the only one who could be expected to earn a reasonable income, and he was seven.

What happened next is clear, if uncertain in detail, and typical for the lives of orphaned Victorian children. Those old enough to work were farmed out as apprentices or domestic servants, while the youngest were taken in by relatives with space and – you hoped – a kindly disposition. The alternative was the grim reality of the Shepton workhouse, which loomed nearby as a constant reminder of the dangers of penury. In fact the town's workhouse was rebuilt in 1848 because it was too small, such were the effects of the economic hardship brought about by the rapid decline of its wool trade in the face of the new mechanised competition from up north. The Lewis children did manage to avoid the workhouse, and, although there are no family stories describing what immediately happened to them, we can deduce what must have taken place. By the time of the 1851 census Maria, Ann and John are with a draper in Glastonbury, Mary is working in a shop in Wells, and thirteen-year-old Eliza is with her aunt Christian in Shepton. The much older Elizabeth is a servant in the substantial household of the rector of a Somerset village. The orphan family has been spread around the towns and villages of Somerset.