

# The Edwardian Department Store



A 1911 view of a thronged Oxford Street looking west. John Lewis's shop is the far block with the awnings visible. No. 254 and beyond is TJ Harries, which Spedan would buy in 1928.

Kipps was taught how to tie up parcels... to block, fold and measure material of all sorts... and to practise a servile obedience to a large number of people. He had to... hold up curtains till his hands ached. The use of half the things he sold he did not understand... they were to him first and last no more than things, heavy and difficult to handle in bulk, that one folded up, unfolded, cut into lengths, and saw dwindle and pass away into that mysterious happy world in which the Customer dwells.

HG WELLS, IN KIPPS, 1905

Many more people than formerly come to London and to city centres to do their shopping; they prefer to make their purchases where they can concentrate their forces and diminish fatigue. What an amount of fatigue and trouble is avoided where one can order one's mutton downstairs, buy one's carpet on the ground floor, and deck oneself out in the glory of Worth or La Ferrier on the top floor, to all of which one is borne on the wings of a lift, silent and swift.

**B**y the end of the nineteenth century there were over 200 department stores in Britain. The quote above is from the journalist and society hostess Mary Lady Jeune. The Edwardian era was the great heyday of the department store, both from the viewpoint of the draper and his (and it's almost always his) customer, but also from the shop floor. What was it like to work there? Who were the people who slaved away in the shops of the great entrepreneurs and helped create their wealth? The second half of the nineteenth century had been a bonanza for the energetic retailer. The population of England and Wales increased between 1861 and 1901 from 20 million to 32.5 million. Rural mechanisation and poverty led to migration to the towns, which accelerated the growth of town centres and major shopping streets. The majority of the population enjoyed a rise in real income of around 40% from 1880 to 1900, particularly among an expanding white-collar professional and clerical middle class. Moreover, Britain's world dominance encouraged a greater confidence that people could afford to spend money rather than save it. And every day there was more to buy. The country itself was opened up by railways; historical trade tariffs and barriers had been largely swept away by the 1860s, and the switch to the steamship brought more goods into the country faster, and they cost less when they arrived. More of the imports were now manufactured rather than raw materials, and the rise in mass manufacture made it hard for the small specialists, like shoemakers for example, to survive. The United States increasingly led the way with new ideas in both manufacturing and retailing, and their exports weren't just goods, but ideas – and a retailer.

### Gordon Selfridge Arrives

In the middle of the Lewis family's implosion, six days after John Lewis signed his settlement with Oswald, a new competitor opened at the west end of Oxford Street, one who had found British stores 'curiously backward', and who determined to bring in some real competition. And the competition he brought shook the complacency of the London department store magnates. It had been widely anticipated ever since the American Gordon Selfridge had arrived with an entourage in London three years earlier and bought a row of shops at the quieter western end of Oxford Street. He acquired them much more quickly than John Lewis had done, doubtless by paying the owners a