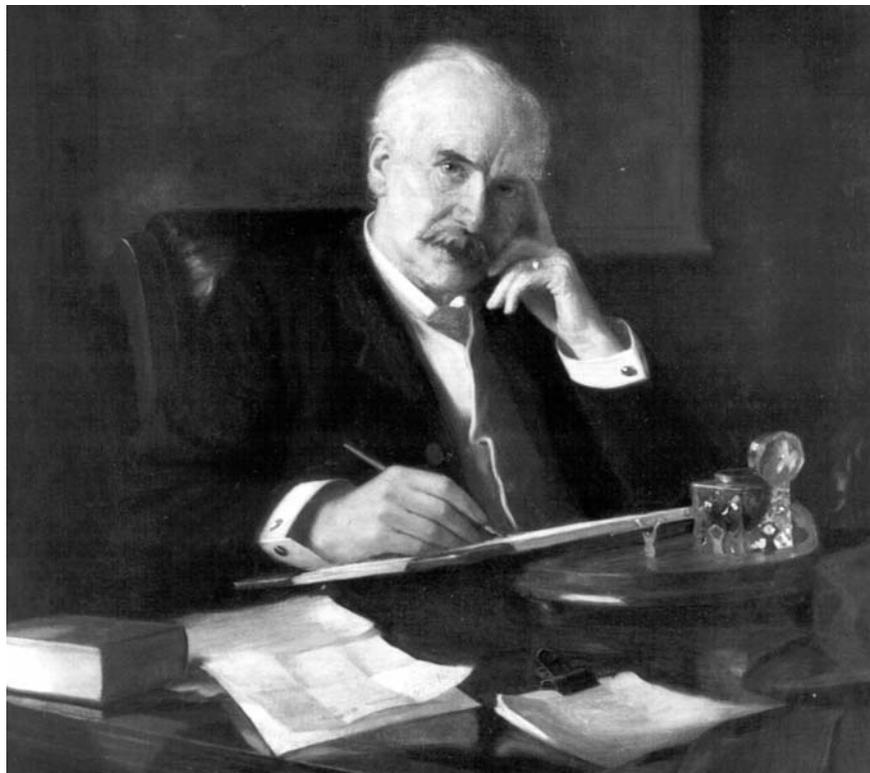


Jesse Boot and the rise of Boots The Chemists

In this article Simon Phillips focuses on aspects of the relationship forged between Boots The Chemists and the nation in the period 1883 to 1945



Jesse Boot, 1909: his religiously motivated concern for the poor extended to the selling of products with the welfare of the working-class customer in mind

A comment from the *Nottingham Evening Post* in 1918 encapsulating the remarkable rise, in both size and status, of Boots Pure Drug Company and indicating how the growth of the company from small beginnings was indeed one of the “wonders of commerce”:

“Accuracy and potency are not trifles. On the contrary they are the most important things in every-day life . . . The man exact and diligent in business, and the tidy housewife proud in the spotless cleanliness of her house, would appreciate a visit to the laboratories and factories of Boots The Chemists. The careful preparations to ensure scientific precision would delight the business man and the housewife’s heart would glory in the immaculate cleanliness of white glazed interiors and spotless equipment . . . each [branch] being specially designed and constructed as a chemist’s shop — equipped and fitted to meet adequately the requirements of the district.”

The eulogy was no doubt imbued with more than a little civic pride but nevertheless is a valuable trailer in alluding to the association between the worlds of work and home, a method by which Boots the family chemist could be portrayed.

CHEMISTS TO THE NATION

In the 19th century nearly all pharmacies stocked proprietary medicines and sold those made by themselves for prices that could frequently be beyond the means of the poor, the section of the population who, owing to poor living conditions, were no doubt in most dire need of medicinal assistance. A contemporary publication, *Pearson’s Weekly*, encapsulates the old-fashioned *modus operandi* of the trade:

“Their profits were enormous, outrageous — such, indeed, as to make it very difficult, or even sometimes impossible, for the poorer classes to afford proper medicines when there was illness in the house. But, with a fatuity incomprehensible in an educated body of men, they declined to budge one jot from their ancient position, even when the movement began to threaten their business existence, but treated the new traders with a lofty scorn, and kept up their prices at the old level.”

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It was this practice that Jesse Boot sought to challenge, infusing the profession with a philosophy of “philanthropic retailing”, his religiously motivated concern for the poor extending to the selling of products with the welfare of the working-class customer in mind. Boot was praised for knowing the limitations imposed by poverty, the “lean purse” and the “bitterness of prohibitive prices for everyday necessities”. If he could ease the debit side of the weekly budget by only a few pence, he would be rendering a great service to the community. In an advertisement in *The Young Marooners* from circa 1895, Boots claimed that through supplying all the necessities at cheap prices, money was left over in the family budget, saying “we make £1 go as far as 30 or 40 elsewhere. We are not physicians. We never prescribe, but we prepare and sell pure drugs, which no family can do without — honest medicines prepared from the best of materials — not intended to supplant the physician’s skill, but to remedy the minor ailments which can be cured by simple treatment.” This altruism was cojoined with inherently commercial and economic motives, the need to draw attention to the remedies on offer.

Jesse Boot’s approach upon taking over the management of his father’s herbalist



Two advertisements from Boots Scribbling Diary: "Dainty requisites for the toilet table", 1913, and "Everything for the toilet", 1924



OPPOSITION FROM THE TRADE

In the formative years of the company, the philosophy of Jesse Boot was not one that greatly endeared him to his peers in the pharmaceutical profession. The Nottingham Chemists' Association discussed the issue of competition from Boots as early as 1877 with the amount of protestations (and no doubt jealousy) mounting year by year. The first pharmacist employed by the company, E. S. Waring, appointed in 1884, remembered how he entered the company in a period of unrest: "... in those early days the advent of an organisation which was to wipe away much glamour and consequently much of the lucrateness of a semi-mysterious profession, was by no means welcome. The stir in the air which somehow implied a sense of doom to many old conceptions naturally incurred animosity in the conditions then prevailing."

In 1888 the formation of Boots Pure Drug Company Limited was a response to those who doubted the quality of Boots's cut-price goods. The inclusion of "Pure Drug" was to counter claims from competitors that cheap prices were interchangeable with cheap products. In a pamphlet produced in the early 20th century, Jesse Boot outlined reasons why Boots Cash Chemists had the right to call themselves chemists:

- We are chemists. No one who wished to be taken seriously would assert the contrary; but perhaps in this matter the Pharmaceutical Society is not to be taken seriously
- We have qualified managers at every branch, without exception, and at some branches several qualified men
- What are we to call ourselves seeing we do a chemist's business?
- How would the public know they could get their prescriptions filled at our shops if we are not allowed to let them know we are chemists?
- Seeing we have spent all this money as chemists, where would be the justice in disallowing us the title? (Referring to the amount spent on fixtures, fittings, signs, made out of black and gold all costing thousands of pounds.)

None of these deterred the Pharmaceutical Society from a succession of (ultimately unsuccessful) legal actions against Boot in the opening years of the 20th century. Yet in true defiant style, Jesse Boot responded with the proclamation: "We are now on friendly-footing with Pharmaceutical Authorities... we retain our name... the name of Boots Cash Chemists... and we have established a better status for qualified chemists of whom we have over 500 in our associated company."

By the 1930s, it would appear that the Pharmaceutical Society had put all its animosity towards Boots behind it, eulogising Jesse Boot to the hilt upon his death in 1931 and in *The Pharmaceutical Journal* of 18 July 1936, presenting some positive figures. The

shop in Goosegate, Nottingham, in 1877, is summed up by a comment he made in later life. "I found that everywhere articles, particularly drugs, were being sold at ridiculously high prices and without any regard for neatness and attractiveness. My idea was simply to buy tons [*sic*] where the others bought hundred-weights or less, thus buying much more cheaply, and to make all the articles I sold look as attractive as possible." This policy of buying and selling for cash saw the name "Boots, the Cash Chemist" become a well-known slogan and one that gravitated into the formation of subsidiary companies at the turn of the century. Boots Cash Chemists Eastern, Northern, Southern, Western and Lancashire enabled the co-ordination of a nationwide "conquest" of towns and cities in Britain. By 1900, there were 181 branches, rising to 394 by 1910, 618 branches by 1920 and 876 by 1930. In 1933 the 1,000th branch was opened in Galashiels in Scotland, the occasion celebrated with much pomp and circumstance. The pressing of a button installed at the Savoy Hotel in London released the catch of the door at the branch relayed to those in civic and directorial roles assembled in London.

This display of brazenness can be viewed in the context of Boots The Chemists zeal in shop design. The *Nottingham Journal* recalled in 1926:

"When he established up and down the country his attractive business establishments — everything fitting into orderly and artistic displays, and literally radiating efficiency in service — the star of the old type of musty, smelly, untidy druggist's stores began speedily to set."

Jesse Boot was keen to champion the aesthetical as much as medicinal side of his trade, making shopping a leisure activity as much as a chore. In a Fancy Goods Catalogue in 1911 he explained: "The unexampled beauty of the goods and the remarkable value which we offer can alone be appreciated to a personal inspection; whilst in our branches you will be treated as a guest, not as a prospective customer, thus making the selection of your presents a pleasant and agreeable pastime."

In the 1920s, the company opened their "Wonder shops", veritable department stores, architecturally and aesthetically pleasing (to the company at least). "Chemists to the nation", however, implied just that, providing a service to all classes of customer. As consumerism in Britain gathered pace from the end of the 19th century, attracting clientele was not simply a matter of appealing to the baser instincts of the lower classes. Attention was given to the beautifying wants of the female customer, the launch of the "Number Seven" beauty range and the opening of a beauty parlour at the Regent Street branch in 1935, the culmination of the growing strength of the beauty trade. Two advertisements are shown above.

Here we see an example of Boots The Chemists attempt to convince that they were indeed "Chemists to the nation" (see opposite).

The statistical gurus of the company made the claim that they served every person in Britain twice a year and indeed a R. A. Rowlands of the Sutton branch claimed that in December 1921, his shop served 24,818 people despite the population of Sutton amounting to only 21,065.

population of Great Britain at this time was 44,700,000 and there were 15,000 chemist shops, with each one serving 2,980 people. There were 22,280 qualified pharmaceutical chemists in Britain, one for every 2,006 people. Boots employed roughly eight per cent of qualified pharmaceutical chemists and operated 7.5 per cent of chemist's shops. These figures illustrate the heightened importance of the profession at this time, by the 1930s, the field of retail pharmacy well-established.

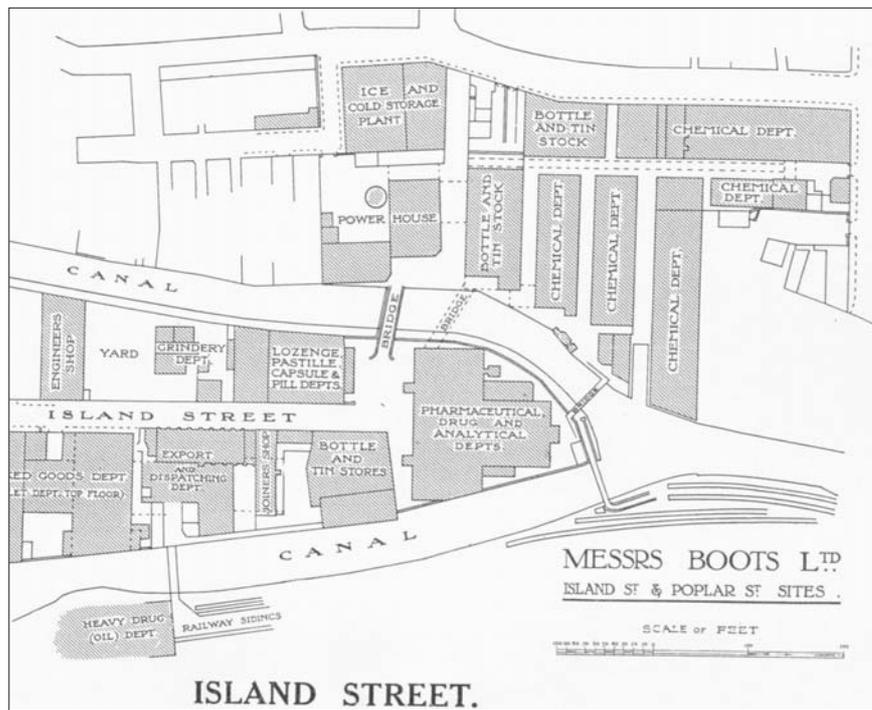
A critical watershed in history was the passing of the National Insurance Act of 1911. Before the introduction of the National Health Insurance scheme in this year, 90 per cent of medical prescribing was done in general practitioners' surgeries. Access to professional medical services was restricted with the pharmacist viewed as "the poor man's doctor". Yet the Act meant an increase in prescriptions as medical benefits were extended to the working classes. Pharmacists realised that it made sound commercial sense to go beyond the mere supply of prescriptions and extend in the arenas of health and beauty. In October 1931, upon the occasion of National Pharmacy Week in the United States, the editor of the *Drug Trade News* said of pharmacists:

"National Pharmacy Week is set aside once a year to commemorate the service performed for society by that faithful army of professional workers, one of whom is in your corner drug store, who, when sickness steals into your home or accident lays you low, skillfully blends those healing ingredients prescribed by your physician to help you get back your good health."

While 10 years later, in an address to the Pharmaceutical Society upon its 100th anniversary, the Reverend Bishop Crotty praised the Society's work: "More valuable, sometimes — as you well know — than many medicines is the lift that can be given to the depressed and the querulous personality, by a man or woman who deals with them as a human being and not as a mere technician." Boots had played a leading part in this growth, a growth that ironically could have been extinguished by the actions of the Society.

CIVIC PRIDE

It is rather fitting that our protagonist, concerned so much with the health and beauty of the nation and the veneration in which the customer was regarded, should make a strong contribution to the prosperity of the "Queen of the Midlands" as the City of Nottingham was termed. Boots Pure Drug Company were one of the so-called "new" industries (as opposed to the old industries of cotton, lace and hosiery), grasping the opportunities presented by the new-found fads of cigarette-smoking (Player & Sons), cycling (Raleigh Cycle Company) and social medicine, whose enterprise would sustain the local economy



Plan of Island Street works c1887. *The Bee*, January 1923

through the years of decline in the traditional industries. The decline of older industries enabled Boots to develop and expand a burgeoning manufacturing operation centered around the city centre. By the turn of the century, the company's Island Street works encompassed the production of a wealth of pharmaceutical products. A sketch of the site at this time illustrates this (see above).

By 1914, the first purpose-built manufacturing laboratory and drug warehouse had been completed. The acquisition and

subsequent development of the above sites was a precursor to the magisterial structural developments erected in the 1930s. In July 1933 the "Wets" factory at Beeston opened at a cost of £300,000, the frontage composed almost entirely of glass and constructed throughout in reinforced concrete (see picture p928). In a souvenir brochure, compiled in honour of a visit to Boots's Beeston factory, the writer waxed lyrical by philosophically surmising: "The beauty of machines, the beauty of animals, and the

beauty of men and women lies in this adaptation to purpose and perfect expression of inward personality. It is the same with a factory." Further imagery-filled assessments were offered by the *Aberdeen Evening Express*, which talked of the "factory of Utopia" and "an industrial crystal palace" and the *North Mail & Newcastle Daily Chronicle* of "architectural poetry". Symbolism did not stop with newspaper reporting of the factory itself but with the opening ceremony on 27 July 1933. Lady Trent launched the factory on its "maiden voyage" in the following way: "With a cheery 'This is how to do it' she passed her gloved hand between the points of the projector on her left and with startled surprise saw the suspended bottle crash against the inverted silvery horse-shoe in front of her. This was decorated with white heather, the symbol of good luck. The broken bottle and some of its contents landed in a receptacle immediately below the horseshoe, and for the rest of the day the odour of Eau de Cologne pervaded the vicinity."

As a gauge of the city's contribution to the pharmaceutical profession, by 1952 Nottingham had been chosen on three occasions to hold the annual conference of the Pharmaceutical Society.

CHEMISTS TO THE NATION

BOOTS THE CHEMISTS have a shop which is ALWAYS OPEN DAY & NIGHT in the following towns:— NOTTINGHAM LONDON MANCHESTER GLASGOW EDINBURGH PLYMOUTH BIRMINGHAM NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE LIVERPOOL BOURNEMOUTH

SERVING more than 135,000,000 Customers

DISPENSING more than 5,000,000 Prescriptions ANNUALLY

EMPLOYING over 1,500 Qualified Chemists in more than 1,000 branches

Boots Chemists

NUMEROUS BRANCHES IN GREAT BRITAIN

OVER 17,000 BRITISH EMPLOYEES

OVER 50,000 BRITISH SHAREHOLDERS

Advertisement from *Boots Scribbling Diary 1934* showing an array of statistics — number of branches, chemists, employees, prescriptions, customers, etc



The "Wets" factory, Beeston, Nottingham, opened in July 1933 at a cost of £300,000

By 1952 there were 222 pharmacies in the Nottingham area plus four dry stores and 38 surgical appliance suppliers.

BOOTS AND WORLD WARS

Boots played a leading part in the expansion of pharmaceutical and other forms of research. Pharmaceutical research was originally carried out in universities and other academic institutions yet gradually companies came to realise that advantages could be accrued from conducting one's own research and investigations in the fields best suited to their own particular kind of business. Such was the reputation for excellence in research that the government called upon its services in both world wars.

One of the first processes undertaken by the company upon the outbreak of the hos-

pitalities in 1914 was to commence production of "goods" for men at the front such as water sterilisers, vermin powder, foot comfort, compressed medicines and the ingenious "tinned heat", a pocket stove. Later in the war, at the behest of the government, aspirin, atrophine and phenacetin were produced and crude glycerine obtained from soapmaking requisitioned for the manufacture of explosives. More than eight million box respirators were supplied to the Allied Forces in connection with the anti-gas department of the government. A total of 115 million water sterilising tablets were produced and saccharin equal to 1,785 million tablets.

During the 1939-45 war, the government presented Boots with a contract to provide gas masks, aspirin and saccharin. Special work included the preparation of 2.5 million special

ampoules for time fuses and the repairing of gliders. In 1944 alone, Boots supplied the British and allied governments six billion medicinal tablets, 24,000 hypodermic tablets and 2.5 billion water sterilising tablets. Yet the most significant contribution of Boots to the war effort, with a long-term effect, was the development of a new manufacturing technique for penicillin. Production began in May 1944, a new factory opened in Nottingham, producing by the end of the year the equivalent of a quarter of a million doses. The factory was a completely self-contained unit with its own power-house, laboratory, borehole and canteen. An outline of the company's research programme from 1915 until the 1980s is shown above.

To sum up, that the Pharmaceutical Society's actions were unsuccessful is a testament to the strength of Jesse Boot's arguments and of the man himself. Imagine a world devoid of the famous blue sign that adorns so many shop fronts in the high street and shopping centre. Jesse Boot may have adopted a hitherto unprecedented approach to the pharmaceutical trade, one that fermented chagrin among the Society, but one that ultimately set the tone for retail pharmacy as we encounter it today.

Chronology

1877	Jesse Boot takes over family's herbalist business in Goosegate, Nottingham
1883	Boot & Company Limited formed (nominal capital £10,000)
1885	Manufacturing operation commences
1887	Move to Island Street warehouse
1888	Boots Pure Drug Company Limited formed
1898	Occupation of Station Street premises, thenceforth becoming head office
1912-14	Planning and completion of first purpose-built manufacturing warehouse at Island Street
1920-33	Boots Pure Drug Company owned by United Drug Company Inc of America
1931	Death of Jesse Boot, aged 84
1933	Opening of D10 "Wets" factory at Beeston, Nottingham, opening of 1,000th branch at Galashiels
1934	Five day week experiment leads to inauguration of five day week
1938	Jubilee of Boots Pure Drug Company celebrated, D6 "Drys" factory opened
1939	D31 building opens, housing canteen, gymnasium and Boots Day Continuation School
1943	Research department begin programme of antibiotics and fermentation research including the largest surface culture plant of penicillin in Britain

BOOTS COMPANY ARCHIVE

Images by kind permission of The Boots Company Archive.

The archives are not open to the general public, although limited access can be arranged for the purposes of academic research.

For information contact Judy Burg, Company Archivist, D122 Records Centre, The Boots Company PLC, 1 Thane Road West, Nottingham, NG90 4XY.