A LOT IN STORE

Celebrating our shopping heritage

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This publication is the first thematic study produced for the NSW Heritage Office and NSW Ministry for the Arts 1998–2001 Movable Heritage Project.

*A Lot in Store* tells the story of NSW shopping and retailing and investigates why our shopping heritage is vulnerable. It investigates how to identify, conserve and interpret historic shops and collections. It also explores opportunities to keep historic shops in business and to celebrate this living aspect of our communities.

It was researched and written by historian Joy McCann with advice from shopkeepers and owners, the Heritage Council of NSW’s Movable Heritage Reference Group, heritage advisors, regional museum officers, NSW museums and other people interested in historic shops. John Petersen, Sarah Buckle and Lianne Hall from the NSW Heritage Office provided editorial assistance.

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Cover: Bill Morgan in the café his family have run since 1935
The Golden Gate Café in Hillston was built in 1929 and Bill started working there when he was twenty years old. This traditional corner shop and café now attracts locals and visitors as a rare surviving shop from an earlier era. Photograph by Marinco Kojdanovski, reproduced courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Inside covers: G.J. Coles Department Store, Canberra, c.1958
Photograph courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

Backcover: The metal change tray in Bill Morgan’s Golden Gate Café in Hillston
This tray has been in daily use for about sixty years. Original fittings and objects are still used in the café which has been run by the same family since 1935. Photograph by Marinco Kojdanovski, reproduced courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

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ISBN 1 876415 57 6
HO 02/02
November 2002

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A Lot in Store

Shops from any era may be regarded as a significant part of our heritage – even shops established in recent years. However, the case studies from A Lot in Store focus on shops surviving from the late-nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth centuries, since these are now increasingly rare. One aim of this study is to highlight these shops and to encourage others to recognise their significance, before these places succumb to changes that irreversibly alter or destroy their heritage significance.

This study aims to give practical suggestions to people who want to look after a particular aspect of our shopping heritage. It has a focus on interior fixtures and movable collections and explains how to record information about the shop and its contents. This will assist you in assessing the significance of the shop as a whole and not just as an empty building shell. The case studies demonstrate how the building, layout, movable items, written and oral histories, as well as people, contribute to cultural heritage significance and how this significance can be used to guide decisions about future use and management of our shopping heritage.

If you are concerned about the fate of a special shop, or appreciate that authenticity can add to customer appeal, there are case studies of special shops that are celebrated and lovingly cared for. Sadly, despite the best efforts of owners and communities, a number of shops featured in A Lot in Store have closed or changed since research was completed in 1999. Owners have retired or died and businesses have closed or been sold to new owners; shops are constantly changing hands and undergoing new leases and fit-outs. Our shopping heritage is vulnerable unless we can work together to slow the hands of time and keep this aspect of our heritage alive.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the NSW Heritage Office, the NSW Ministry for the Arts, the Heritage Council of NSW's Movable Heritage Reference Group and the Heritage Advisors Network for giving me invaluable support and assistance while researching and writing A Lot in Store. The expertise and advice provided by Movable Heritage Reference Group members Kylie Winkworth, Meredith Walker and John Petersen are particularly appreciated.

Beverley Kingston's *Basket, Bag and Trolley; A History of Shopping in Australia* provided a valuable guide to the historical development of shopping in Australia.

I gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people, who generously shared information, photographs and memories about their shops: Bill Carberry, Patrick Carmody, Russell Chick, Jack Confoy and the late Harry Confoy, Paddy Donohoe, Leo Duff, Ernie Gawthorne, Christopher Hamilton, Grace Knuckey, R. Jones, Nick Loukissas, Alec McIntosh, Bill Morgan, Mr and Mrs Rose, Glenn Short, and Phil and Donna Walmsley.

I also appreciate the efforts of other people who provided valuable information and insights about their favourite shops: Ken Brooks, Robyn Christie, Bronwyn Clark, Darren Clarke, Jenny Drenkhahn, John Ford, Sally Gray, Wendy Hucker, Andrea Humphreys, Mary Loder, Paddy and Ross, Philip Palmer, Parramatta Heritage Centre, Michael Pearson, Ken Phelan, Graham Quint, Norma Raisin, Margaret Roysds, Fiona Schirmer, and the Newcastle Regional Museum.

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Introduction
Shops are central to the life of almost every village, town and city in Australia. Wherever people have settled, retailing has invariably followed, although the vast distances of Australia have stretched the resourcefulness and patience of its far-flung communities. In turn, those selling goods and services have been endlessly enterprising. From hawkers touting their wares in caravans, to the ubiquitous general store, suburban corner shop and elegant department store, our retailing history is a proud and colourful one.

In NSW the evolution of shops and shopping is part and parcel of the story of European settlement. In the early days, ‘going shopping’ was still a relatively new concept, even in Britain. The new settlers brought their traditions with them, buying their goods from home producers, street-sellers or at the market-place. The first purpose-built shops began to appear in Britain from the early nineteenth century, and colonial societies at the outposts of Empire quickly followed suit.

Today, some shops survive that can still speak to us from another time. You may still be able to visit a favourite shop from childhood, or discover a store where customers have their orders filled whilst they wait. More often these days, you may only have the memory of smells and sounds of a corner shop long gone, with its vast array of boiled sweets or tins of biscuits. Or you might remember a trip to town, dressed in Sunday best to buy school clothes or search for basement bargains or marvel at the spectacles in shop windows and Christmas pageants.

In city and country older shops are becoming rare. These shops and, in many cases, the families still associated with them, are living links with the past. Inside, you may still catch a glimpse of the history of the shop and its locality in the shelves and counters, tools of trade, signs, and perhaps even the stock.

It is the more portable items that are the most vulnerable part of our shopping heritage. They are often removed from the shop in the final throes of selling or closing down. Their meaning and significance are quickly lost in the fall of an auctioneer’s hammer.

Whilst objects such as signs and biscuit tins are highly prized and avidly collected, it is the shops retaining original contents and customs that are of special value in telling the history of a place. These shops have the power to show us our history and to inspire us with their stories.

This publication tells the story of shops of different types, from different eras, and from different regions across NSW. All are shared by communities still fortunate enough to have a significant shop in their midst.
A Lot in Store

Shops and shopping

A short history

Anthony Hordern & Sons’ New Palace Emporium, 1905

The earliest retailing activities in NSW began in a modest way. The government store, known as the Commissariat, supplied the fledgling settlement at Sydney Cove with essential provisions, and enterprising ships’ crews conducted a flourishing trade exchanging non-perishable goods for food. In time, the colonists were able to purchase local produce, perhaps even snapping up a bargain at auction when someone left the colony or died. Many also ordered goods direct from Great Britain through family or friends. Until a regular currency and bank was established by Governor Macquarie in 1817, settlers relied largely on bartering or bank drafts from London.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century there was a regular Saturday produce market at what is now Circular Quay, and hawkers plied their wares in the streets. There were a few dining rooms, and a small group of retailers sold essential supplies procured in bulk from visiting or chartered ships. Over the next century Sydney established itself as the major point of distribution of imported goods to the rest of eastern Australia. As the number of free settlers in the colony increased, more specialised shops also began to appear. They were typically domestic in appearance, similar to British shops of the period. The shop front was usually established at the street level, and the owner’s family lived in rooms above or behind the shop.

In keeping with the domestic scale and character, early shops usually featured timber windows divided by sash bars into multiple panes. Passers-by might peer into the dim gas-lit interior, or inspect goods on display at the doorway. By the 1840s the streets of Sydney were dotted with canvas awnings, and signs advertised all manner of wares. In 1844 Louisa Meredith observed how Sydney shopkeepers adopted ‘a little code of their own, prescribing the proper distances to be observed between drapers and haberdashers, butchers and pastry cooks’. New technological innovations revolutionised retailing in the mid-nineteenth century. Gas lighting began to illuminate Sydney streets from 1841, providing opportunities for window shopping and trading after dark. Most shopkeepers already used gaslights inside their shops, although drapers in particular preferred daylight in order to display the true colours of their merchandise.

Many shopkeepers who displayed their wares at the doorway or outside the shop would employ a child to ward off wayward dogs or thieves, and to rescue bolts of fabric and other merchandise from wind and rain. The first plate-glass windows in NSW were installed in the Farmer’s department store in Sydney in 1854. Bigger windows meant that shopkeepers could now display their merchandise to passing vehicular traffic. This was particularly important in a city where...
the wives and daughters of wealthy families went on shopping expeditions by horse-drawn carriage, rather than negotiating on foot poor roads and the bustle of street life.

Arcades

Shopping arcades originated in Paris in about 1800. They were private streets or precincts, usually covered with a glass roof and lined with artisans’ stalls. They often featured an elaborate arched entrance to lure customers from the street. Some had decorative entrance canopies, and ornamental gates at each entrance that could be closed after shop hours.

Arcades were immediately popular with Europe’s wealthy classes, who could promenade and shop far from the dust and grime of public thoroughfares. By the end of the nineteenth century, there were arcades in nearly every European city. They were usually tenanted by retailers at the luxury end of the market, selling fashion items such as jewellery, millinery, books and music.

Sydney Arcade (1881) and the Strand Arcade (1892) were amongst the first to appear in Sydney. The Queen Victoria Building (1898) was built as a general market, although its design emulated the grand arcades of Europe.

In the 1930s there was a spate of new arcades built in country towns across NSW. The arcades often featured a picture theatre as well as a range of specialty shops.

By the early years of the twentieth century, the comfort of shop interiors had become an important attribute. Given the fact that the larger stores were generally selling the same types of goods, their competitive edge came from price, range and the quality of service that they could offer.

Cool, light and airy shops were considered attractive, and a far cry from the small, cramped, gas-lit shops of the early days of the colony. Awnings, colonnades or verandahs became important features, protecting both window displays and customers. Stores appealing to wealthier clientele often emulated the style of a grand residence, complete with elegant surroundings and discrete serving staff. Stores with departments for different types of goods increasingly segregated the merchandise according to gender - women’s clothing in the vicinity of haberdashery, fashion accessories and household necessities, and men’s clothing located near sporting goods and hardware items. This categorisation of merchandise along gender lines also occurred in smaller country stores, and even extended to separate entrances and window displays for men and women.

‘Ladies this way’ – separating men and women shoppers

Retailers have gone to great lengths to cultivate the female shopper. From the early twentieth century many stores produced elaborate displays of fashion items. They lavished attention on their women customers and displayed goods to appeal to feminine fantasies.

In dividing their stores into specialised departments such as clothing, hardware and shoes, retailers began to designate men’s or women’s departments. David Jones had a Men’s Grill. Gowings installed a barber’s shop (one is still open for business). Women had their own rest rooms complete with writing areas and telephones. Even the furnishings reflected the differences: marble floors and timber fittings for men, mirrors and soft fabrics for women.

As a general rule, women were thought to be more likely to linger in a shop and browse, while men were inclined to make quick forays. Shopkeepers were advised by trade journals and popular opinion that men were particularly averse to women’s clothing departments, so shops were laid out accordingly.

Even the smaller stores followed this trend. The Draper of Australasia journal tested the water in 1925 by running a competition on ‘How to Attract Women to a Men’s Wear Store’. One entrant suggested labelling separate entrances and dividing the shop down the middle! Men, he said, could shop ‘without qualms of conscience or fear of women’s interruption’.


2 The Draper of Australasia, 20 October 1925, p467.
New services such as hydraulic lifts, electric lighting and escalators encouraged customers to move freely around spacious new multi-storied shops. Changes in the scale and methods of selling introduced greater efficiencies and enabled goods to be sold more cheaply. As stores became larger and busier, the knowledge that was once demanded of store assistants became increasingly fragmented or irrelevant.

In the early years of the twentieth century there seemed to be a thriving shopping street in every town. In Sydney shopping went through a boom period lasting from the 1880s until the 1920s. It faltered only briefly during the 1890s economic depression and a severe drought a few years later. The drapery trade fast became the largest single trade in NSW, with a turnover equal to all the Sydney and metropolitan food retailers combined. The larger drapers based in Sydney gradually dominated the clothing trade, extending their mail order businesses to entice country customers. Some of the more successful drapers branched out into other lines of goods and created department stores.

Going to town; the rise of the department store

The gold rushes in NSW during the 1850s brought a sharp increase in population and an associated boom in retailing. Some of the older general stores were expanded and rebuilt. In Sydney and country towns a new era and scale of shopping emerged with the department store or palace emporium.

Many of the now legendary department stores began as drapers or ironmongers, later expanding to cater for general household merchandise. Reputedly based on Aristide Boucicault’s ‘Bon Marché’ Paris store, which was built in 1852, the urban department stores were also following in the tradition of the humble universal providers. They became purveyors of every household need.

Some of the larger Sydney-based department stores, such as David Jones’ George Street store (built in 1887) and E. Way and Company in Pitt Street (1891), went on to become doyens of the early twentieth century retail trade. With their elaborate facades, entertaining window displays, vast ranges of merchandise, impeccable service and attention to comfort, the major department stores became household names for both city and country customers. Many people still remember them with great affection from childhood shopping trips. These city stores were mostly family businesses that associated themselves with stability and conservative, patriotic values.

The big department stores also occupied extensive sites along Sydney’s main thoroughfares, and by the 1920s their towers became city landmarks. They were highly competitive and enticed country customers through extensive mail order services. Department stores aspired to the style and glitz of Paris and New York.

Some stores established their own factories, finding it more profitable and competitive to produce their own ‘house brand’ of drapery, beds, bicycles, ironworks, and food lines. Whether offering imported or locally-made products, the Sydney department stores succeeded in fostering an image of glamour and quality, and this was supported by aggressive advertising, in-house attractions such as dining rooms and entertainment, credit services and huge store resources.
The retail co-operative movement that started in late-nineteenth century Britain also translated into a similar movement in the colonies. In Sydney the Civil Service Store was established in 1871 as a response to the demands of an emerging middle class requiring conservatively priced household goods. Elsewhere in NSW retail co-operatives were formed to provide lower priced goods for families in provincial towns and to supply goods to the more isolated agricultural settlements such as those in the Riverina and the South Coast.

After the dreary years of World War I shops picked up on the new and lively mood of the twenties. Stores began to change dramatically in appearance. This was the jazz age, and the department stores led the revolution in style. Many smaller shops adopted the new look and added some glamour of their own.

In the 1920s and 1930s many shops were remodelled or built in the art moderne style. Dark, small shop fronts were out. Large panoramic display windows were in. There was shiny stainless steel, chrome and black glass in abundance. Large display windows were often deeply recessed, with curving or angled glass windows to lead the customer past extensive window displays into the store. This enabled shopkeepers to have their store interiors permanently on view, even when the shop was closed. Prominent shop signs became popular and were painted or fixed to a window or parapet and even displayed inside the store.

Window dressing became an art form. Fashionable displays featured selected items carefully arranged, rather than stockpiled with special offers. The new interwar style dictated that dark shops and heavy fittings were no longer acceptable. The new style incorporated glass counters and shelves, with stock kept out of view in storage areas. Clothes and accessories were displayed on free-standing frames or mannequins.

The interwar period also signalled a revolution in the way people shopped, particularly in the cities and suburbs. ‘Cash-and-carry’ grocery shops began to appear in the 1920s and signalled the beginning of the self-service style of shopping that we know today. Many grocers still continued to provide credit and offer the personalised service that their customers expected. However, by World War II more and more shops were converting to self-service and shopping habits began to change. Shops were refitted with self-service tables and refrigerated display cabinets. Customers became familiar with navigating chromium turnstiles, selecting their purchases and queuing up at a row of cash registers. Bright lighting inside and coloured neon lighting displays outside, enticed customers to inspect and buy.

Chain stores were also taking off, and people flocked to them for bargains. This informal style of shopping suited the new era of self-service. Low cost household goods and minimum counter service gave them the capacity to handle large numbers of shoppers efficiently and anonymously.

Moran and Cato had pioneered grocery chain stores in Australia back in the 1880s. The first Woolworths Stupendous Bargain Basement opened in Sydney’s Imperial Arcade in 1924. Within 15 years Woolworths had built 78 stores. Over the next two decades the company spawned branches throughout metropolitan Sydney and country NSW. Meanwhile, in spite of the growth of the chain store networks, country shops remained relatively unchanged and people in rural NSW generally shopped in the old ways until well into the 1960s.

Winn and Company’s Drapery Emporium, Newcastle, 1907

In an era when shops were judged by the quality of their personal service, the appearance and manner of shop assistants was all-important. They were subject to rigid discipline, store rules, and low wages. Sales staff in the larger department stores were compensated with superior amenities, training and social opportunities that the smaller retailers could not offer. In return, the stores demanded high standards and absolute loyalty from their staff. Photograph courtesy of the National Library of Australia.
The arrival of regional shopping centres heralded perhaps the greatest shopping revolution of all. Top Ryde Shopping Centre in Sydney opened in 1957, six months after Australia’s first complex was completed in Brisbane. Top Ryde had parking for 400 cars and provided a covered pedestrian mall and an assortment of shops. It was described at the time as recapturing ‘the carnival atmosphere of the old European marketplace’, while offering the housewife a place to shop in safety and convenience. Based on the success of neighbourhood shopping in the United States, these huge sites dedicated to retailing became the symbol of the increasing prosperity, consumerism and our increasing dependence on the car after World War II.

Over the next two decades the family-owned city department stores that had set shopping styles and standards for most of the century were in decline. The trend was clear: between the 1960s and 1990s retail shopping in Australia drifted inexorably towards the suburbs and away from city centres. Traditional shopping streets attempted to draw back customers by emphasising the range of goods that the different shops could offer, the convenience of nearby public transport, and the character offered by a diversity of building styles that modern shopping centres could not match. Many suburbs and country towns created pedestrian shopping malls, with entertainment and off-street parking.

However, while the smaller shopping streets and individual stores continue to struggle for their share of the market, it is the privately-owned and strictly regulated environment of the regional shopping centre that dominates our shopping experiences in the early twenty-first century. In the end, large-scale shopping centres are yet another chapter in the history of over 200 years of retailing in Australia.
Dressing the window was the cheapest form of advertising

In the interwar period window dressing and ticket writing became an art form. The Draper of Australasia journal ran a regular feature called 'Window Dressing: the Art of Display', and awarded prizes for the best design. This 1925 evening display for McCathies in Sydney was championship runner-up. The Draper of Australasia journal courtesy of State Reference Library, State Library of NSW.

MacKenzie’s Grocery Department, Manilla, NSW, c.1912

This grocery department within a larger general store is typical of the period. The general store or universal provider emerged as the most common type of shop throughout NSW. They offered everything from food to crockery, clothing, fabric, shoes, hardware and stationery. Note the Bentwood chairs provided for customers waiting to have their orders filled. Photograph courtesy of Bicentennial Copying Project, State Library of NSW.
Black and White Milk Bar, Martin Place, Sydney, 1932

Mick Adams migrated from Greece at 16, and in 1932 opened Australia’s first milk bar in Martin Place. It was an instant success. Within five years there were an estimated 4,000 milk bars across Australia. Armed with Mick Adams’ recipe for success, a friend claims to have introduced the idea to London. Many shops have been established by newly arrived migrants seeking a means to earn a living. In turn, they have introduced new ideas, colour and vitality to our shopping streets. Photographs courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
Shop layouts, Sydney, 1903 and 1937

Two versions of a recommended layout for a clothing store, showing changing ideas about store layout and service. The 1903 design emphasised service at the counter, while the 1937 floor plan encouraged impulse buying from bargain tables and show cases. The Draper of Australasia Diary, 1903 and Rydges Business Journal, 1937. Drawings courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.
3

NSW shopping history at a glance
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1788</td>
<td>European settlement at Sydney Cove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1803</td>
<td>First commercial advertisements appear in <em>NSW Government Gazette</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1817</td>
<td>Regular currency and bank established by Governor Macquarie</td>
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<tr>
<td>1824</td>
<td>Anne Hordern’s millinery and drapery shop established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1835</td>
<td>David Jones opens his first store in George Street</td>
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<tr>
<td>1854</td>
<td>First plate glass windows installed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Sydney Arcade built</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1880s – 1920s</strong></td>
<td>Shopping boom in Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920s</td>
<td>‘Art moderne’ style revolutionizes shop design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1924</td>
<td>Woolworths opens its first chain stores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1932</td>
<td>Australia’s first milk bar opened in Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1940s – 1960s</strong></td>
<td>New council by-laws lead to widespread demolition of shop verandahs, in order to modernise shopping streets and remove likely hazards to vehicular traffic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1957</td>
<td>First American-style drive-in shopping centre in NSW opens at Top Ryde, six months after Australia’s first shopping centre in Brisbane.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1960s – 1970s</strong></td>
<td>Number of shops in central Sydney dramatically declines in favour of suburbs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Many business owners replace awnings with shop verandahs modelled on original or ‘heritage’ style.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anthony Hordern’s department store closed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>1980s – 1990s</strong></td>
<td>Changing economic conditions lead to widespread closure of bank branches and government services in country areas, threatening the viability of many small shopping centres.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2000 – 2002</strong></td>
<td>Introduction of goods and services tax closes many small family run shops.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-commerce becomes more popular with the ever increasing number of home computers, but concerns about the security of credit card and other personal information slow growth.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Globalisation sees further expansion of American franchises in Australia.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Above left:** Leo Duff’s Barber Shop, Wellington
*Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*
Living history

How shops show their age

Niagara Café, Gundagai

Shop fronts are an important part of our shopping heritage. They contribute to the distinctive feel of a street, marking the ebb and flow of the town’s fortunes and fashions and providing shoppers with familiar landmarks and a sense of the past. Remodelled in the 1930s, the Niagara Café shows the distinctive influence of the art moderne style – curved glass, terrazzo tiles and bold stylised lettering. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Shops are part of the history of European settlement in Australia. Many shops have special importance as part of our shared heritage.

Some shops have not changed a great deal since they first opened their doors, and their physical features reveal a lot about the way people bought and sold goods and services in a particular place and era.

Others hold a special place in the life of a community – somewhere to meet, or a familiar touchstone in times of change.

Some shops are associated with the history of different cultural groups, including the many thousands of migrants who arrived after World War II. Many established a foothold in their new country by opening shops, and ushered into their communities a whole new world of social customs, foods and languages.

And some are traditional shops, where the skills or old ways of doing things have been kept alive over several generations.

Many things contribute to our understanding of the history of retailing: the way a shop was built, location, layout, the way spaces were used, movable items like chairs, counters, shelving, display cabinets, cash registers, weighing equipment, signs and store records, and the stories and traditions associated with the shop. All of these are a part of our cultural heritage.

Most shops in city and metropolitan areas have been altered and modernised, and it is the movable objects - items such as equipment and furniture - that are usually discarded along the way.

Nevertheless, there are still some survivors, an increasingly rare and precious group that represents the very essence of our shopping heritage. Most are likely to be found in country areas, where they carry on amidst fluctuating economic conditions and changing shopping habits.

The owners have often been there since the shop began, or have continued to run their family’s business. The future of these shops is often uncertain. In some cases, new owners have embraced an ageing shop’s history, and found its authenticity to be an asset. Undoubtedly, many people delight in finding a shop that is more than just a place to select, pay and exit as quickly as possible.

This chapter explores some measures of a shop’s heritage.
The shop front

The character of a particular street or locality sets it apart from any other place, and a town that has a range of shop fronts, reflecting different eras and fashions, is an interesting place to visit and shop. These shop fronts become landmarks of changing fashions and fortunes. They are an important part of the history and streetscape of a place.

Many suburban streets and country towns still retain shop fronts in styles that were popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In older shopping streets, the verandahs or awnings, signs, entrances, tile finishes, scale and design of the windows, even the entry porch, all represent a time capsule of changing styles and fashions.

Shop fronts are also the public face of the shops that lie behind the facades. In many cases, the architectural detail of the shop front might be all that is left intact after the shop itself has been gutted. Intact shop fronts are still an important part of retailing history. They add to the flavour of their street, and are often part of our architectural heritage as well.

Many shops have retained their original glossy tiles, sometimes with ornate motifs or colourful borders. Some have timber or brass window framing, a tiled entry porch, double timber doors. A shop that still has solid timber, or perhaps frosted glass panels behind the window display area, is also likely to have an original or early shop front, and possibly interior fixtures and fittings.

By keeping this diversity of shop fronts as a marker of our history, communities are making a statement about the character of the locality, and what they value from their past.

Main Street, Braidwood

Historic shopping streets are undergoing a revival as traditional or innovative small businesses offer an alternative to the one-stop shopping experience of large regional shopping centres. Country towns such as Braidwood have successfully capitalised on the historical architecture and character of their shop fronts. Photograph by Gillian Mottram.

Verandah, Up-To-Date Store, Coolamon

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Feature tiles, Short’s Butcher Shop, Narromine

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Window blinds featuring advertising,
Finn's Old Store, Canowindra
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Tiled entry porch, pharmacy, Mudgee
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Window display and glass panels,
Coolac General Store
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Signs on front window, The House of Quality,
Boorowa
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
‘Are you being served?’

Customer service and shop layout

We can learn a great deal about a shop’s history, and the way that the business has been conducted over time, by examining the layout of the interior.

The typical general store in the late-nineteenth century, for example, featured a deep narrow shop floor, high ceiling and skylights or small windows set high along each wall. There was usually a long timber counter along one or both sides of the shop and timber shelves lining the wall behind the counter. Stock was sometimes stacked behind the counter, to be brought out when a customer required a particular item. In some shops, there was a general atmosphere of clutter, with items suspended from the ceiling and displayed on tables or in boxes in the centre of the shop.

There are many shops that still look like this, revealing how business was conducted in an earlier era. Many general stores and drapers’ shops, for example, can be found with a timber counter and shelving extending along one or both sides of the shop. There might also be timber or metal and glass display cabinets, and tables or racks of merchandise placed strategically around the shop floor.

General stores during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were usually highly organised – everything had its place. Different types of merchandise were grouped together – haberdashery, fabric and clothing on one side, food items on the other and hardware at the rear of the shop. Some shops kept perishable foods like hams in a cellar or cool room. Dry goods such as flour were often dispensed from hopper bins under the counter and kept secure from vermin.

In larger shops, shoppers may have been greeted by a store floorwalker, who ensured that his customers were comfortably seated on a Bentwood chair before ushering in a sales assistant and closely supervising her standard of service. Customers would be given personalised service and their particular needs discussed, negotiated, weighed, measured and paid for at the counter. This might also have been the place for exchange of news or gossip. In some older shops it still is!

When the practice of self-service and cash-and-carry shopping gained momentum between the two world wars, customers were encouraged to select their purchases from island counters arranged across the shop floor, then move to a central cash register to complete their transactions. This new style of retailing was spelt out in the physical layout of the store, and is the layout that most shoppers will be familiar with today.

By looking closely at the layout of the shop floor, we can read tell-tale signs about where it fits into the history of retailing. It provides a window to the history of shopping in our society, and is as important as the shop front in our shopping heritage.

Coolac General Store

This traditional country general store is still run along the lines of the original universal provider, supplying everything from food to hardware, farm equipment and stockfeed to the local farming community. It has a general air of busyness and clutter, but everything has its place. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Behind the scenes

There is more to a historic shop than meets the eye! Behind the shop front, beyond the shop floor, there may be other rooms and spaces that can tell us more about the shop's history and the way it functioned.

Behind the scenes there were often areas dedicated to aspects of retailing that customers might never see. Most shops, for example, were generally fitted with a cashier’s or accounts office – this might have been anything from an elaborate room with benches and stools, to a simple alcove. Here, stock records were maintained, dockets prepared, change dispensed and monthly accounts tallied. The office may also have had clerical furniture, accounting equipment and perhaps stored signs or other paraphernalia.

Country general stores usually had a produce store for bulk dry goods such as stock feed. The produce store may have been a shed or a lean-to attached to the shop. Sometimes it was a separate building altogether. Goods would have been moved into the store through a sliding door at the side or rear. Some stores used handcarts and others even employed a trolley system on tracks.

Shopkeepers and their families traditionally lived on or near the premises, enabling them to work long hours and provide some security for the shop. Most shops built in the nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth, had a residence attached at the rear or side of the building. Families from smaller shops might only have had a couple of rooms to share, whilst others lived in detached dwellings nearby.

Cafés required a kitchen or meals preparation area, and this might have been a special room at the rear or part of the residence. More specialised shops such as butchers, bakers, barbers and pharmacies required specialised work areas, ranging from bakehouses to dispensaries. These were all part of the shop but generally remained out of sight to the general public.

A surprising number of shops still retain these hidden workspaces. They add to the significance of a shop by helping us to understand much more about the daily business of retailing. The cashier’s office, for example, is commonly found tucked away in a rear corner of older shops; produce stores and residences are sometimes intact, or have been kept but adapted for other uses.

Just as importantly, the movable objects associated with these work areas also contribute to the history of the shop: platform scales in the produce store, records in the office, stored furniture and outmoded equipment. These items can have particular significance while they remain associated with the store where they were used.
Buying groceries

Grocers’ shops, or grocery departments within larger general stores, were the precursors of today’s supermarkets. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, people relied on grocers for staple foods such as sugar and tea. Shops and equipment from the heyday of the grocery trade still to be found in many places, and they are an important part of the story of retailing.

The name ‘grocer’ originally dates from the Middle Ages and described a wholesale trader of bulk foods such as spices. By the late-nineteenth century, grocers were tradesmen skilled in selecting and blending teas, roasting coffee beans and selling all manner of dry goods, although manufacturers had also begun to introduce pre-packaged products to promote their own brand names.

An instruction book for the Australian grocery trade, published in 1925, advised grocers how to lay out their stores and stock food. Walls were to be lined with square shelves of different sizes to accommodate the various packaged products. Bulk dry foods such as sugar and oatmeal should be stored in hopper bins under the counter; linoleum was best for floors, preferably laid over felt or newspaper, or dry sawdust to correct an uneven surface. The shop’s cat received special mention for its role in deterring rodents.

Counters in older shops were generally of two sorts: French-polished mahogany for dry groceries and white pine that could be scrubbed daily for provisions such as cheese. By the 1940s grocers were complying with new hygiene standards and surfaces had to be easily scrubbed – linoleum, marble or tiles were recommended.

Self-service grocers’ shops were also just beginning to emerge. In the 1950s many stores were converted to the new style of ‘cash-and-carry’. Customers selected their goods from refrigerated display cases and racks of brand name foods and paid for them at the turnstile. Service took on a new meaning, as the traditional skills of the grocer gave way to managing a store that was well stocked and efficient.

Finn’s Old Store, Canowindra
Kraft cheese boxes made ideal drawers in this former general store at Canowindra. The shop, now an antique business, still has hopper bins beneath the counter and drawers individually labelled with the names of spices and other cooking ingredients. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

The art of packaging
Every grocer’s shop had an ample supply of brown paper and string for packaging goods. Before the advent of pre-packaged brand name goods, grocery items were supplied to shops in bulk and the grocer weighed or counted and packaged according to the customer’s requirements. Some stores still use the once ubiquitous paper and string for certain goods. There are two paper dispensers, of different sizes, at Bickmore’s General Store, and the Coolac General Store still employs string dispensers suspended from the ceiling. Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.
The impact of government regulations

The business of preparing and selling fresh food has perhaps been subject to closer scrutiny and regulation than any other type of shop.

In early butchers’ shops, for example, it was common to hang carcasses at the front of the shop to allow fresh air to circulate. With harsh climate and isolated settlements, necessity was the mother of invention for the Australian meat industry. Ice boxes, cool rooms and marble surfaces helped the situation, and many butchers’ shops used these cooling techniques until well into the twentieth century. One of the earliest air refrigeration units in NSW was installed in Thomas Playfair’s Sydney meat business in 1895.

By about 1900 attitudes to food hygiene had begun to change. Butchers, along with other food retailers, were under increasing pressure to conform to new hygiene regulations. The first meat inspector in the State was appointed in 1908, and by 1913 he reported that only five butchers’ shops were left in Sydney that did not have enclosed premises. Soon, all butchers shops were required to be enclosed with mesh (glass came later), walls were to be tiled, and floors to be made of concrete. The use of sawdust to soak up spills and odours on the floor was deemed to be a thing of the past, although the practice continues in some butchers’ shops.

In more recent years community concerns about contaminated meat has brought a fresh round of government regulation that will see the end of older equipment such as timber chopping blocks. By keeping these items in the shop, perhaps on display, owners can contribute to preserving and interpreting something of the heritage and character of food retail shops, as they respond to ever changing standards and technology.

James Leggatt’s Smithfield Butchery, Gulgong

Carcasses hang from the verandah of a butcher’s shop in Gulgong in the early 1870s. Photograph courtesy of the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales.
Short's Butchers, Narromine

Glenn Short's butcher's shop in Narromine was built in about 1905. When his father, Kevin, began working there in 1948, the shop still relied on its own abattoir for a regular supply of fresh meat.

A cool room at the rear of the shop was insulated by thick timber walls packed with charcoal. Pipes circulated through the room and were cooled to keep temperatures down. A second cool room, built inside the shop itself, had walls filled with sawdust for insulation, and had a water tray on top with strips of flannel over the side that dripped water.

The shop also once had hanging rails arranged in a semi-circle around the shop, and meat was prepared and displayed on slabs of white marble. Refrigeration and changing government regulations have brought many changes to butchers' shops such as this.

Above right, and right: Substantial butchers' shops were once common in suburbs and country towns, testifying as much to the important role that meat has played in the Australian diet as to changes in shopping habits. The unusual tiled façade and interior of this shop now regularly attracts visitors.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

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A Canadian maple cutting block is proudly displayed in Short's Butchers at Narromine.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Changing technology

The twentieth century revolution in technology has directly influenced many aspects of retailing, from handling money and recording sales, to preparing goods for sale and displaying merchandise. Many shopkeepers have embraced new technology with a passion. Others have never seen the need to do more than connect the electricity. Manual systems, early equipment and traditional tools of trade can still be found in daily use.

G.A. Zink & Sons, Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, Sydney

Zink’s clothing shop for men was built in about 1911, but the display windows, terrazzo tiled porch and chromium-plated shop sign on the shop front are tell-tale signs of a refurbishment in the art moderne style in 1926.

The Zink family operated their business along the lines of a European tailor’s shop. The present owner undertook his apprenticeship with the Zink family in the 1960s, and continued to work with them until acquiring the business himself. Whilst the layout has been altered over the years, the owner has cared for much of the shop’s early equipment and furniture, and has reintroduced some elements that were kept safely stored until a recent refurbishment.

The shop and equipment together provide a tantalising reminder of the heritage of tailoring in Australia. In the tailor’s room upstairs, worn wooden benches bear witness to many hundreds of hours of cutting and preparing garments.

In the tailor’s workroom the sewing machines, overlockers, fans and radio are still going strong and are tangible reminders of the early technology of tailoring. Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.
Tools of the trade

Tools of trade are a significant part of our shopping heritage, but they are often the very things that are sold off or lost when shops change hands or are modernised.

Display stands, weighing and packaging equipment, furniture, storage containers, advertising signs and flyers, specialised tools, shop records, cash registers or overhead cash transfer systems – all of these are significant because they illustrate how different types of shopkeepers went about selling their merchandise or service.

They also show how some types of shops had to be purpose-built for the trade, while others could easily move into any kind of shop building.

Barber shops, for example, had to have specially-designed chairs fixed to the floor, but their main tools of trade were very portable indeed: scissors, razors, a leather strap for sharpening blades and a sterilising cabinet. The shop itself was usually quite small, perhaps with two rooms and a solid panel behind the window display to block curious gazes and ensure privacy for the customer in the chair. How different from the open style of today’s hairdressing shops.

A general store, on the other hand, needed plenty of shelving and counters and little specialised equipment. Many general stores were long and narrow, with high windows or skylights to maximise wall space and allow sufficient daylight to penetrate. The introduction of cash-and-carry shopping and refrigeration after World War II saw the introduction of additional display tables and stands, often acquired from other shops.

Meanwhile, drapers, mercers and milliners required specialised units and stands for displaying everything from garments to gloves. Whilst display cabinets are still relatively common in older clothing shops, the specialised wire stands and mannequins from earlier eras are now more likely to be found on display in museums.

All trades relied on advertising of some kind, from the cheapest window display to mail order catalogues and newspaper advertisements. However, it is the collectables, from shop signs to cash registers, that attract the most attention. Many original shop signs, cash registers and furniture, for example, have been snapped up by keen collectors. Collections of equipment and furniture that are still in place, and especially those items still in use, are particularly significant because they are now rarely found in situ.
Distinctive store catalogues were a major form of advertising for department and chain stores from the late-nineteenth century, and mail order catalogues brought the city stores to country lounge rooms. Advertisements and mail order catalogues remain one of the most important sources of information about the range and style of equipment and merchandise to be found in shops in different eras and have themselves become part of the heritage of shopping.

The Draper of Australasia Diary, 1903, courtesy of Mitchell Library, State Library of NSW.

Store records or archival material such as these stocktaking books from Bickmore’s General Store dated 1907 and 1944 are irreplaceable, providing a glimpse of what people in rural NSW were buying during the war years. Paper records are particularly susceptible to being discarded or otherwise destroyed through neglect. Wherever possible, they should be kept with the shop and stored in a secure place free from insects and dampness.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Cash or credit?

The way cash was handled and accounts processed often determined the layout of a shop. For example, most stores had a small office or alcove for maintaining accounts and keeping cash and records.

When people shopped in the early years of settlement in NSW, they generally expected to purchase on credit and settle their credit accounts at the month’s end, or whenever they could afford it.

Gradually, cash trading became more popular amongst smaller shopkeepers, as a way of keeping the costs of buying and selling under control. Some small shops, particularly in the country, continued to extend credit to regular customers, while others advertised themselves as cash stores. According to the Rydges Business Journal in 1937, cash was much better suited to the city and suburbs, where people tended to be ‘here today, gone tomorrow’.

With cash trading came a variety of methods to handle cash and docketts in shops. Some shopkeepers simply used leather bags or a cash drawer under the counter. Some still do! Others embraced the latest technology for cash handling. Aerial cash systems, also called ‘flying foxes’, were once common in stores across Australia. With a system of aerial wires to transfer cash and docketts between counter and cashier, assistants could devote themselves to serving customers and they no longer needed to waste precious selling time leaving the counter to visit the cashier’s office. This system also gave the store owner the advantage of having greater control over the movement and security of cash transactions.

When cash registers were introduced in the 1920s, they became the ultimate symbol of the new era of cash-and-carry style of shopping that is still the way we shop today. Cash registers at the point of sale meant greater ease of handling and storing cash for the shop assistant, and went hand-in-hand with the self-selection of goods by the customer. The cash register was the product of a new style of technology.

Rose’s General Store, Binalong

Many country stores today still retain their enclosed or partitioned office, which was usually located securely at the rear of the shop. The bigger department stores also established special rooms where large numbers of office assistants checked and sorted customers’ docketts and, in some cases, dispensed change. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Cash-and-carry made shopping easier and busier by speeding up sales, discouraging credit, and reducing the need for personalised service and shop assistants. Photograph courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

‘Up-To-Date Store’, Coolamon

When the Up-To-Date Store was built in 1909, it was fitted with the latest Lamson Ball System to transport notes and change from the shop assistants at the counters to the cashier’s office at the rear. Cash handling systems have come full circle, and supermarkets in the late-twentieth century have returned to an old idea using new technology. These days, pneumatic tubes transfer cash from the point of sale, saving staff time and reducing the risk of carrying bullion bags to the cashier. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
The corner shop

The corner shop has a very special place in our history. Corner shops, strategically located within the heart of a community, have traditionally catered for the necessities of life – a loaf of bread, the newspaper, perhaps a few purchases – as well as being a place to gossip, exchange views or to pass the time of day.

For regular customers, a corner shop is much more than bricks and mortar. Over many years, these shops have dispensed a sense of stability and belonging in a world of rapid change. Studies have shown that they are particularly important for the isolated and frail in our society. The corner shop, the owner and customers themselves fulfil an important social function in the life of a community. The corner shop may be a private business, but it is a public place.

For many migrants running a corner shop has been an important part of putting down roots in Australia. Many corner shops, particularly after World War II, were run by migrant families. Family members all helped out, keeping the business open for long hours. In recent years, however, our insatiable demand for flexible shopping hours and the lure of supermarkets and 24-hour convenience stores has led to the demise of the humble corner shop.

Knuckey's Corner Store, Wellington

The shady verandah at Knuckey’s Corner was always a popular spot for locals to meet and shelter and is part of the Swift Street heritage precinct. In the 1960s new council by-laws required the verandahs of Wellington to be removed because they posed a traffic hazard, and Grace Knuckey maintains that her business suffered as a result. The current verandah is a recent addition, designed to replicate the original from early photographs. In 2001 the corner store closed when Grace Knuckey retired and contents were sold. The corner store was under threat from a proposed car park but a community campaign, which saw thousands of signatures on petitions, saved it from demolition - for the time being.
Photograph by Joy McCann 1999.

Grace Knuckey (right), with her father and mother in the family store, Wellington, c.1960

Grace Knuckey worked at the counter of her corner store since she was 15 years old. Her father established Knuckey’s Corner in 1915. For much of the century, the shop was open from eight in the morning until midnight every weekday.
Photograph courtesy of Grace Knuckey.
The Golden Gate Café, Hillston

The Kidman Way stretches for 800 km, south to north, connecting the remote towns of this State’s outback country. When promoters produced a travellers’ guide for the new highway, Bill Morgan’s general store and café at Hillston was given special mention as a corner store, ‘a favourite of both young and old’.

The Golden Gate Café was built in 1929 and Bill Morgan’s parents bought it in about 1935. It was more of a café then. There were meals served at tables, and a marble soda fountain dispensing home-made fizzy drinks. Bill installed wooden cubicles for diners, and also sold lollies, ice-cream and fruit.

Bill once knew everyone that came in – people from town as well as the wheat and sheep farmers in the area. With improvements in road transport, the odd intrepid tourist or outback truckie would stop by. New agricultural and horticultural developments along the Lachlan River in the 1980s attracted new families and itinerant workers.

Then the new highway opened in the early 1990s. Bill’s Golden Gate Café is poised to tap into a lucrative outback tourist market, one of an increasingly rare group of shops in the tradition of the old corner store.
Keeping traditions alive

People often take great pleasure and comfort from the well-worn floorboards, familiar faces and customs that they have come to associate with certain shops over many years. Corner shops often have the feel of an old friend. So do places like hairdressers or barbers' shops, the local butchers or greengrocers shop, or perhaps the general store. That air of familiarity, the habits of a lifetime and the traditional ways of doing things, are part of a community's less tangible heritage.

The following examples show how a shop can play such an important part in keeping a community's traditions alive.

Harry's Café de Wheels, Sydney

Harry's mobile pie shop near the Woolloomooloo Wharf has become something of local legend, as well as popular tourist destination for visitors to Sydney. The original shop is in the collection of the Powerhouse Museum but the tradition of eating at Harry's continues. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Leo Duff’s Barber Shop, Wellington

When Leo Duff conducted a survey of 50 customers to see how they felt about the cobwebs in his shop, 35 voted that they should stay up there along the ceiling above the display window. After all, the cobwebs did not interfere with cutting hair. In fact, they were simply a part of the shop – spun with hundreds of stories and jokes shared by Leo’s customers over many years.

In 1997, hundreds of Wellington residents, former staff and old and new customers turned out to help Leo Duff celebrate 50 years in business. The 50th anniversary book was signed by 712 people, a testimony to the role that Leo and his shop have played in the town. It was a day for speeches and entertainment, reviving old memories and renewing old acquaintances.

Leo opened for business on 25 August 1947 at the age of 19, fresh from a barber’s apprenticeship in Penrith. On the first day of business, he arrived at the shop to find his first customers sitting on a step outside the shop. After opening the door, he found the electricity had not yet been connected, so the two boys were sent on to another barber. Fifty years later, those two ‘boys’ were amongst those who helped Leo to celebrate!

Leo still has all of his daybooks recording the shop income and expenses from that very first day. Even today, he marvels at his first week’s takings – 10 pounds 1 shilling and 9 pence represented a fortune for a young lad in those first years after World War II. Leo’s was one of seven barbers’ shops in town. His own shop was one of a pair. The previous owner had operated a billiard room next door.

For many years Leo had three wooden barbers’ chairs, two in the main shop and one in a back room. There was linoleum on the floor, and light bulbs hung from the high ceiling. Like most barbers of the period, Leo sold tobacco goods. His customers could also wager bets on the races, keep up with the boxing news, listen to the radio and smoke whilst they waited for their fortnightly trim and shave. Even though haircuts were a relatively cheap item in the household budget, Leo always had a large number of ‘book ups’ or credit customers in his record books. However, most paid up on payday or, in the case of boys, when father came in for his haircut.
Leo Duff (centre) in his shop in the 1950s, with Reg Laws (left, standing), Reynold Toyer (left, sitting), an unidentified assistant (right, standing) and Archibald Davis (right, sitting). Before the rise of unisex hair salons, barbers’ and hairdressing shops tended to be exclusively men’s or women’s places. In Leo’s shop, for example, men came for their fortnightly haircut and shave, and shared local news and jokes, and perhaps the odd wager on the horses. Photograph courtesy of Leo Duff.

Leo Duff’s window display testifies to the gendered nature of barbers’ shops and Leo’s life-long association with the boxing ring, both as a young professional fighter, and later as a local boxing coach. A new window display always generated a lot of interest in the town. In 2001 Leo Duff’s shop closed and Leo has moved to another barbers. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Some of the significant items in Leo Duff’s shop include the original cupboards, mirrors and a cash drawer, as well as scissors, shaving equipment, ashtray stand and a sterilizing cabinet. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
The migrant experience

Many different cultures have influenced shopping heritage in Australia. Migrant shopkeeping families have enriched our history, as well as our shops and shopping streets. Many shops maintain and promote the traditions and foods of a particular culture. They have served many functions for people from migrant backgrounds – as a place to welcome new arrivals or meet old acquaintances, a place to buy traditional ingredients, play cards, get news or seek help or advice. The shops themselves have helped many newly arrived families to gain an economic foothold in their new country. Many shops have succeeded, often relying on the family unit to put in the long hours and hard work.

These shops have also been the setting for people encountering another culture for the first time, or at first hand. Many will recall their first experience of new food and new languages in a shop setting – perhaps an Italian greengrocer, a Vietnamese grocery store, a Lebanese clothing shop or a Greek café. In their own way, migrant shopkeepers have been the vanguard of our multicultural society.

In recent years, the shops established by migrant families have become the stalwarts of many shopping streets – staying put or setting up shop in the face of new shopping centre developments and economic downturn. In many places, migrant family shops have played an enduring and influential role in our retailing history and heritage.

Kwong Wa Chong, Haymarket, Sydney.

This shop was established in 1910 and is now the oldest shop in Chinatown. As a successful merchant, Kwong Wa Chong was a community leader and provided assistance to Chinese immigrants newly arrived in Australia. Chinese migrants have a long history of shopkeeping in Australia, from fruit and vegetable retailing before World War II to running cafés and restaurants. By the 1980s Chinese cafés were a familiar site in suburbs and country towns; there were 7,000 of them in NSW alone.

Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
The Niagara Café, Gundagai

Greek cafés and milk bars were once a familiar sight in suburbs and country towns throughout Australia. Greek cafés are still to be found, sometimes operated by the same family, and now often serving traditional Greek cuisine alongside the more familiar Aussie fare of steak, pies and hamburgers.

The Niagara Café is testimony to a shop that is still living and celebrating its migrant heritage. Built in 1902, it is a rare example of a Greek café that has changed little since its refurbishment by previous owners in 1933. It has also become something of a legend in the process.

Behind the curved display windows, over the terrazzo entrance and through the glass doors inscribed with the letters ‘NC’, visitors can still dine in timber cubicles, admire the wall mirrors and lights, and enjoy the traditional Greek hospitality of this country café.

In one display window of the Niagara Café, visitors can read about that famous visit of Australia’s wartime Prime Minister, John Curtin. On a dark winter’s evening in 1942, Curtin and his small party came to the café in search of a meal, and the china and silver tea service are now on show as a memorial to the part that the café played in our wartime history.

The Niagara Café has a striking art moderne style interior, with timber dining booths, black and chromium counters and a gleaming sign along the wall. The atmosphere and history have long made this café a favourite for travellers along the Hume Highway.

The Niagra’s own piece of political history, on display in the front window to commemorate John Curtin’s visit to the café in 1942.

Greek and Australian flags proudly displayed from one of the 1930s wall lights. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
A family store

The history of many a shop is inextricably linked with the history of a particular family. Family shops have often carried on through times of war and economic depression, loss of family members and the rise of the shopping centre, and a shop can sometimes tell as much about a family’s history as it can about retailing history.

Bickmore’s General Store, Kurri Kurri

When Edwin Bickmore built his first store along the main street at Kurri Kurri in the Hunter Valley in about 1904, he established a family business that would span the fluctuating fortunes of this small mining town during the course of the twentieth century.

Kurri Kurri was proclaimed a town in 1902 and serviced the crop of coal mining settlements at Stanford Merthyr, Pelaw Main and Abermain. A Scottish immigrant Edwin Bickmore arrived in the Hunter Valley to work in the new coalmines. By 1908 he was able to build his substantial new brick store and a separate residence opposite his first shop. He became a pillar of the local community and was a member of the Chamber of Commerce and involved in a wide range of local organisations.

This was a general store in the tradition of the universal providers that proliferated throughout NSW in the nineteenth century. Bickmore’s sold boots and shoes, dress materials, manchester, clothing, ribbons, laces, hosiery, haberdashery items, as well as food, health remedies and hardware. Bulk dry foods were dispensed from the timber produce store at the rear and a cellar was used for storing bacons and hams.

Alec McIntosh married Mr Bickmore’s daughter in 1934, and began working in the store with his new wife and father-in-law. Mr McIntosh had begun working in shops at the age of 14, and learnt his trade on the job and through classes on everything from ticket writing to selecting and using spices, cheeses and dried fruits.

Bickmore’s was a meeting place as well as a shop, and the relationship between shopkeeper and customer was always friendly but respectful. Mr McIntosh recalls how he always took great care to scan the local newspaper for school examination results or other information, so that he could greet a regular customer with some favourable observation about their child or the family.

Eventually, Mr McIntosh took over the business, and his own family too became a part of the story of this shop. From about the 1960s the business began to feel the impact of widespread car ownership, as customers began to shop further afield. However, the shop operated as a corner store till the end of the century, though the range of its stock was much reduced since its heyday before World War II.
Alec McIntosh has watched generations of local children grow up. He recalls how he would keep an interest in their school or sporting achievements, and make a point of mentioning them when next their mothers came in to shop. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*

The haberdashery boxes are still in use. *Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.*
The changing nature and needs of small businesses mean that many of our older shops and their contents face an uncertain future.

There are different ways of caring for our shopping heritage, depending on the circumstances of the particular business and owner, and the local opportunities available to those wanting to look after it.

Perhaps it is your own shop. Perhaps it is a much loved or historically significant local shop that is to be sold, and the precious shelves and counters, equipment and furniture are likely to be removed and sold off too.

The shop owner might be intending to ‘clean up’, modernise or refurbish, or perhaps the owner is elderly and the future of the shop is uncertain.

How can we bring this rich and colourful history with us into the twenty-first century?

The following sections explain how to go about determining what is significant about a shop, and what actions will help to look after it.

- Staying open for business
- Recording the contents
- Understanding significance
- Keeping collections in place
- Making a plan
- Making changes
- Caring for collections
- Putting shops on show
Left: The Paragon Café, Katoomba
The entry to the Paragon is set back and raised from the street and features an original sign, brass window frames, a large door-mat and double timber doors, all of which suggest a clean and comfortable retreat from the outside world. Photograph courtesy of Natalie Broughton 1999.

Below: The Niagara Café has a striking art moderne style interior, with timber dining booths, black and chromium counters and a gleaming sign along the wall. The atmosphere and history have long made this café a favourite for travellers along the Hume Highway.
Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Above: Bickmore’s Store, Kurri Kurri
The corner shop has long served as a meeting place for people to shop and catch up on news, although changing shopping habits are forcing many to close their doors. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Below: Original chinaware and biscuit tin, Niagara Café, Gundagai
The china’s quality and pattern and the Arnotts tin with the famous parrot logo evoke memories of another era and tell us about the experience of eating at the Niagara. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Left: Detail of tiles, Short’s Butchers, Narromine
The unusual tiled façade and interior of this shop regularly attracts visitors. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

Below: Timber drawers, Finn’s Store, Canowindra
Kitchen ingredients such as flour and spices were dispensed from wooden drawers and hopper bins below the counter which were dry and secure from vermin. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
This 1920s terrazzo entry porch was in the latest style and was designed to catch the eye of passers by. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.

The Golden Gate Café in Hillston was built in 1929. Operated by the Morgan Family for 67 years, it remains the local café and traditional corner shop for the small country town of Hillston in the Riverina. Photograph by Marinco Kojdanovski, reproduced courtesy of the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

The Centre Arcade, Cowra
Shopping arcades began to appear in country towns during the 1930s. They offered a convenient sheltered space featuring a cluster of specialty shops, and sometimes even boasted a picture theatre. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Staying open for business

Keeping a shop open for business is perhaps the best way to look after the shop's heritage. A shop with an authentic historical character can add to the vitality and interest of a local town or shopping street. Many people like to shop in places with a 'bit of history', and certainly keeping original fittings and objects will add to their experience.

There are many shops that try to recreate the old world look and feel, but there is nothing like the real thing! Having a genuine heritage shop in your street or town can give you a marketing advantage, as they are becoming increasingly rare. Many towns that have main street programs have already discovered that heritage is an asset for the whole community.

Shop owners, members of the local community or the local council have many options for making the most of their shopping heritage. Here are some suggestions and examples, and you may think of other ideas along the way.

• Form a shopping heritage committee and work together to plan for activities that centre on recording and celebrating the history of significant shops, their contents, and the people associated with them. The committee should include people with a range of relevant skills and knowledge. It may be helpful to include the local heritage advisor and representatives of the local museum, historical society and National Trust.

• Undertake some history research about the shop and individual objects. Use the State Library of NSW or the local library, as well as old photographs, plans, local knowledge, mail order catalogues, stocktaking records, museums, collectors, etc. Tape interviews with people associated with the shop – owners, lessees, and customers – to record the history from different perspectives. Record the interviews in the shop and with the collection, to prompt memories and better document the objects.

• Collect old photographs of the shops and display them with a caption or brief history. Several of the case studies featured in this guide have early photographs on display to show customers something about the shop's history.

• Arrange for a local newspaper to feature a story about the shop and its history. For example, the Niagara Café in Gundagai has featured in articles in the Sydney Morning Herald, which helped travellers and potential customers to find out about this historic café.

• Ensure that information about local shopping heritage is included in tourist information.

• Put together a display for Heritage Week and hold a fair or party at the shop to celebrate its history and role in the local community. Leo Duff held a 50th anniversary celebration for his barber shop in Wellington, and hundreds of residents and customers turned out for the occasion.

• Promote the historic character and traditions of the shop, and show how it is part of the community's history.

• Record the memories of current and former owners, staff and customers.
Hamilton’s Bakery, Abermain

It is rare to find wood-fired bakehouses these days, but at Hamilton’s Bakery in Abermain, located in the Hunter Valley region, the specialised skills and equipment of an early twentieth century bakery live on. Built in 1908, the bakehouse’s centenary was recently celebrated by the Hamilton family and they proudly display a brief history in the front retail shop.

During the 1950s the front shop was used as a general store, with merchandise stored in the bakehouse. A new owner restored the bakery. Through good fortune, the commitment of the current owners, and special consideration by the local council, the bakery has continued to operate with its wood-fired oven, traditional baking equipment and methods. As a heritage bakery, the owners have special council approval to keep linoleum-covered preparation benches and a bare concrete floor.

Some principles to remember:

Approach the owner of a shop with goodwill and sensitivity to their individual circumstances

The owner may be elderly, concerned about their privacy or anxious about the future of their business. They may also be too busy to talk. Because time is money, owners may be more receptive if you buy something!

Involve everyone

Everyone who might be interested in the shop and its history, or who may be able to offer information or assistance.

The shop in the Hunter Valley is advertised as a ‘heritage bakery’, and regulars are treated to pies cooked daily in the brick-lined, wood-fired oven. Here, baker Chris Hamilton uses a wooden paddle to manoeuvre baking trays deep inside the oven. Unlike the three-phase baking process possible with modern ovens, this bakery still operates on a traditional single-phase. The oven is first fired up at 2 a.m. and baking starts at 5 a.m. when the correct temperature is reached. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Recording the contents

Recording or documenting the movable heritage of a shop is a crucial part of looking after our cultural heritage. By creating a list or inventory of the key or significant items, you will have begun the process of conserving the shop’s history.

When objects are moved from the shop – either permanently or temporarily – the recording will help to recover their history and return them to the shop at a later date, if circumstances permit. These are some of the things that you can do:

- Photograph the shop in detail, inside and out, before moving any of the contents.
- Draw a sketch plan of the whole site, including the shop itself, outbuildings and other features such as delivery areas and walkways.
- Make a list of all objects and any fixed items that seem to be part of the shop’s history e.g. signs painted on the building walls or windows.
- Photograph the key items and label the photographs with the object number, name and date of photograph.
- Record information in a standard way (see the Sample Recording Sheet as an example). Write down as much information as possible about each item in your list, such as what it is or what it was used for, where it is located, where it was made, and who owned it (photographs and the sketch plan of the shop site will help here). It is possible to reinstate removed items if they are properly recorded before removal.
- Talk to people who used the object or who might remember its history. If the shop owner, and even present and past customers, record their memories about the shop on tape or video, or in writing, the information can play a valuable part in understanding the history of an item. Ask about the way it was used, whether it was unusual or common, who used it and what role they played. Such oral or written history can enhance the meaning and significance of a shop and its contents.
- Research the history of the locality and the shop, to help you locate the objects in their social context and understand why the shop is significant.
- Carefully examine each object to see how it was used, and note any evidence of wear and tear, repairs or alterations.
- Decide whether the object is likely to be significant (see Understanding Significance).
- Consider researching and recording information about all the historic shops and their movable heritage in your locality, and placing your research material (including photographs, sketches and interviews) in your local library.
## Sample Recording Sheet for Movable Objects

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Object number:</strong></th>
<th>Allocate a new number for each object</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Object name:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Address of shop:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location within shop:</strong></td>
<td>Attach site or floor plan to show location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description of object:</strong></td>
<td>Brief physical description of features, materials, size and signs of wear and tear, repair or alteration (attaching a photograph will help show these details)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>How was object used?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History of object:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>History of shop:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Why is object significant?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What opportunities are there for conserving and interpreting the shop?</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Name of recorder:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date of recording:</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Understanding significance

Understanding exactly what is significant, and therefore worth keeping and looking after, is the first logical step in making decisions about what to do with a shop. While the focus here is on the movable objects or collections in a shop, we need to look at them as part of the shop as a whole.

Understanding significance is widely adopted by heritage professionals as a starting point in any work involving looking after places that are part of our cultural heritage.

The Australia ICOMOS Burra Charter uses the terms aesthetic, historic, social or scientific value to describe what makes a place significant in terms of our cultural heritage. The Illustrated Guide to the Burra Charter explains how these terms are used and gives examples of different types of places that have these heritage values.

As we have already seen, there are many different ways that shops and their contents can be regarded as significant. Here are some things to look for.

Aspects of a Shop’s Significance

The setting

- The location and setting of a shop can still say something about its role in the history of the community. For example, it may have been at the heart of the old main shopping street, or established along a now redundant public transport route, or conveniently located near a cinema.

The building/s

- Few, if any, shops are frozen in time. Changes to the shop and its contents over time may be part of the heritage significance. Evidence of these changes tells us about such things as fashion, technology, ownership, laws and economic ups or downs.

- Through its layout and the types of fixtures and fittings, a shop can also reveal how the shop owner stored, moved and displayed goods.

- A shop might show changes in the way people have shopped in different eras. For example, how people were encouraged to buy goods and complete their transactions through clever positioning of signs and display stands. It might also show changes in use or layout of particular rooms, or the introduction of new spaces and equipment to accommodate retailing trends such as cash-and-carry style shopping.

- A shop can illustrate how changing technology, such as the introduction of electricity, has influenced such things as layout, lighting and the type of equipment used.

- The significance of a shop may be even greater if it has a long history of being associated with a particular family, group or community and this association continues to the present day.

The objects

- Authentic interiors and objects are significant. New shops, fitted out to imitate old-style shops, are not.

- The movable contents of a shop are an integral part of its history and significance. Equipment, tools of trade, signs and furniture from an earlier era, or different eras, often help to explain how that particular type of business was conducted and how changes were made over time.

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4 ICOMOS stands for the International Council on Monuments and Sites. The Charter for the Conservation of Places of Cultural Significance was developed by Australia ICOMOS and formally adopted in Burra, South Australia, in 1979. It is generally referred to as the Burra Charter, and was revised in 1999.
• Evidence of wear and tear is important – the condition of an object is part of its interest, and reveals important information about how it was handled and used.

• Paper records, such as stocktaking and order books, account records, dockets, advertising material and mail order catalogues provide a fascinating and often intimate picture of daily life in a town. They often contain information not found anywhere else: what, when and how purchases were made, who shopped there and slumps or peaks in the local economy.

• Personal letters, photographs, and recollections of owners, staff and customers are sometimes the only sources of information about events, stories, and traditions associated with the shop. They too are part of the heritage of shopping.

• Consider all aspects of the shop, including lighting, atmosphere, smell, even whether the shop has a cluttered or open feel – these can also be significant aspects.

These are just some of the many ways that a shop can reflect aspects of our cultural heritage. Observing and writing down precisely what is significant is a crucial step in determining what is worth looking after.

Some principles to remember:

Consider all aspects of the shop

Whilst this publication pays particular attention to the movable objects in a shop, don’t forget that they are part of the whole shop and its setting – consider all aspects of the shop including the building, shop front, offices, storerooms, kitchens, associated buildings, yards, trees, gardens, walkways, landscape setting, contents, oral history, as well as the wear and tear, smells, sounds and textures.

No one era is necessarily any more significant than any other era

Most shops have accumulated different features and movable items that date from different periods. Evidence of these changes can be significant too.

Don’t be deceived by appearances

A significant shop isn’t necessarily big, beautiful or in mint condition. It can be important regardless of how modest and unassuming it may appear. In fact, some of the more significant shops remaining in NSW are likely to be humble corner shops or general stores, precisely because they are associated with the history of their community and reveal important information through the wear and tear of the years.

Shops with intact interiors, contents and traditions are rare, and therefore significant

Few shops established before about 1960 survive with their original layout and contents. They are even rarer if they are also still being run in a traditional way and are associated with the original owner or an owner of long-standing.

Tools of trade are a crucial part of our shopping heritage, and are often the very things that tell us most about the history of the retailing trades. Because of their portability and attraction for collectors, they are also the things most likely to be removed from the shop. These barber’s chairs and shop signs in Confoy’s Barber Shop at Coolamon are part of the shop’s significant collection of tools of trade and ephemera. Much of the collection’s significance lies in the fact that it remains in situ and is associated with the original place of use and family of barbers. Relocated to a museum, the collection may technically be more accessible to the public but the historical importance of both the shop and the collection will inevitably be diminished. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Keeping collections in place

Keeping original features and contents in situ (in their original location) is part of looking after our shopping heritage.

Here are some ideas:

- Although it is tempting to sell a shop’s contents to collectors, the historic significance of the shop will be greatly diminished by doing so. Make every effort to keep the contents of a shop in situ.
- Don’t automatically assume that you have to modernise and therefore dispense with particular equipment or features of a significant shop because it contravenes health and safety or other legislation. There may be special provision for places and objects of heritage significance. Ask your local council first.
- If items of furniture and equipment have been in use in a shop for many years, and are still in use, then they will have a strong link with the history of the shop and they can actively show how they were used.
- If the items are in storage and can be reinstated or displayed to explain their history and use, you are looking after their heritage significance, particularly if they form part of a collection of items related to the shop.
- If the items have been sold or donated, but are able to be easily identified and perhaps borrowed or returned at a later date, these items will still be a significant part of the history of the shop because their provenance (or origin) is known and their context can be accurately restored or interpreted.
- If items have been acquired, particularly by a collector, and no record is made of their history and use, we consider them to have no known provenance. Lack of provenance will make it almost impossible to trace the history and association of an object with the shop, and this will lessen the significance of the item.
- Where the original owner or family still run a shop, and still maintain traditional ways of doing things, they can be said to be a living link with the past. This aspect of a shop is as important as the physical features and contents, because it takes us beyond physical history and into the realm of people’s feelings and experiences.

Some principles to remember:

Keep significant shops ‘alive’

The best way of looking after a significant shop and its contents is to keep it open and maintain a living link with the past. Removing the movable heritage reduces the significance of both the shop and the objects themselves.

Record key objects

This should be done regardless of the future of the shop. Recording can only be done properly while the contents are in situ. Don’t wait until the shop has closed. See Recording the Contents on page 45. When the provenance, or links between an object and its origins, are no longer known and recorded, we have lost an important aspect of our cultural heritage.

Record people’s memories

Do this as soon as you can. It is too late once the people associated with the shop have died or moved away.

Remember that a lot of our shopping history is ephemeral, and can easily be destroyed or lost

The key rules are: take your time, understand what is significant, and carefully plan what needs to be done before you begin cleaning up or handling any objects. Don’t make hasty decisions.

Older shops often attract collectors and dealers who are on the trail of collectables. For example, the owner of a pharmacy in country NSW is frequently approached by customers wanting to buy this statue. Once bought, such an object may gain in monetary value, but its heritage significance is greatly diminished. At the very least, an object acquired from a shop should be accompanied by a statement about its provenance (origin) and history, and a copy kept with the object and the shop from which it was acquired. Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Making a plan

Having a conservation management plan is the best way to work out what to look after and how to care for it. A conservation plan means that you have a formula for guiding future decisions about looking after the heritage of both the shop itself and the significant contents.

A conservation management plan should include:

- a brief history of the shop;
- a physical description of the shop and its contents;
- a simple statement about why the shop and its contents are significant;
- a conservation policy based on an understanding of what is significant, and describing general rules and principles about such things as how objects will be handled, used, stored or displayed;
- a plan of things to do, and in what order of priority (a strategy).

If the contents of the shop have already been recorded (see Sample Recording Sheet on page 46), this information should be used in compiling the conservation plan.

Wing Hing Long Store, Tingha

The Tingha community has embarked on a process of conserving the Wing Hing Long Store and has prepared a conservation and museum management plan to guide their decisions and conservation work. It is based on the significance of the whole shop site, together with the contents. This store, built in 1881 to supply general provisions to the tin mining communities of the Tingha district, was acquired by the Guyra Shire Council in 1998 in order to keep it as a living museum. The acquisition was made with assistance from members of the local community, the NSW Heritage Office and NSW Ministry for the Arts, the Golden Threads: Chinese in Regional NSW project and the Pratt family who are descended from Jack Joe Lowe, the fifth Chinese owner of the property. The contents are integral to its significance and include original counters, display units, cabinets, shelving, a cashier’s aerial pulley system in working order, merchandise, advertising signs and store records. The shop and contents also demonstrate the changes and adaptations made over the years. The collection will remain intact, with no new objects or collections added. This means that the store will be conserved in the condition it was acquired in 1998. The remaining stock from all phases of the store’s history including the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s will be retained, including the aging contents of tins and bottles!

Photograph courtesy of Karl Zhao.
Extract from Wing Hing Long Conservation and Museum Management Plan

Use the Wing Hing Long store in a way that is compatible with its cultural significance. Use as a place museum is compatible.

Use as a place museum is compatible with the cultural significance of the complex. A place museum is a museum where the structures and their contents are themselves the artefact displayed and other material is not introduced, except as required for interpretation.

Place museum use requires some adaptation for visitor facilities. It should be possible to provide basic facilities without damaging the significance of the complex.

The Wing Hing Long Store is not suitable for use as a general museum.

The purpose of the Wing Hing Long Museum should be to conserve, manage and interpret the site for present and future generations and make its significance and unique stories accessible to visitors and the local community.

Wing Hing Long Store collection is significant as a rare and intact assemblage of retail products, furnishing, records and ephemera surviving in situ in a general store complex in Tingha in Northern New South Wales. The integrity of the collections and their relationship with the various spaces of the building is central to the significance of the store. The store and its contents interpret the history, economic fortunes, social life and people of this small tin mining town. It is essential that the collection be managed and conserved to retain its integrity and significance, and interpret its significance and unique stories to the local community and to visitors.

The acquisition and disposal of objects should be guided by the collection policy.

New artefacts should not be introduced to the collection except in accordance with the collection policy. There should be no introduction of new material or display systems, storage arrangements and possibly environmental controls that would damage the historical significance of the place.

Objects not associated with the store should be deaccessioned. Where possible these objects should be passed on to other museums in the region.

The aim should be to display nothing in the store that is not associated with Wing Hing Long except in the form of structured temporary exhibitions or interpretive material like albums and display panels.
Making changes

Planning for change is an important part of looking after our shopping heritage. Change might mean anything from rearranging furniture to accommodating a new business, equipment or legislation.

Whether the shop is to be sold, leased or simply left vacant, the best practice is to plan for the future recording and care of significant items or collections of objects well before the shop closes, or any changes occur.

When a shop is recognised as being significant, any changes affecting the significance of the shop and its contents should be undertaken with great care, some forward planning and possibly some expert heritage advice. It is now that you will need to be clear about what aspects are important to keep as part of any plans for the future of the business.

Here are some steps based on the suggestions contained in previous sections:

**Step 1: Try to keep the contents with the shop**

When you know what the fate of the shop building is likely to be, decide whether the contents can be kept together with the shop, or perhaps temporarily stored for later reinstatement (see Keeping Collections in Place on page 49). Many shop buildings can be adapted to different types of retailing while significant aspects are left intact.

**Step 2: Record the contents**

Whether or not the objects are to remain in the shop, write down a description and draw the precise location in case they are moved for any reason. Remember to keep your records in a safe place, preferably one copy with the objects, and one stored with the local council library. If necessary, index them for easy access.

**Step 3: Decide what is significant**

Whilst every item should be recorded in a systematic way, you may choose to retain or select key items for keeping or for displays on the history of the shop. There are no hard and fast rules about how to decide which objects to keep, but you will need to gather all the information you can about an object’s history, use, ownership, materials and construction. This will help you to decide whether it is a significant part of the shop and how to care for it.

**Step 4: Seek advice**

The Museums and Galleries Foundation of NSW, or a museum professional, will be able to provide expert advice on dealing with significant objects and writing a conservation management plan, as well as advice on applying for a grant if needed. If the shop building (or buildings) is significant, a heritage adviser (usually attached to the local council) or conservation architect can provide advice on ways to look after it too.

**Step 5: Write a conservation management plan**

Before you start making changes or cleaning up the shop, put together a plan to make sure everyone involved understands the significant aspects of the shop, and agrees on what is to happen. See Making a Plan on page 50. The brochure, *Objects in Their Place: An Introduction to Movable Heritage* will also give you some guidance. It is available from the NSW Heritage Office or downloadable from www.heritage.nsw.gov.au

**Step 6: Raise funds**

If you need to raise funds for doing this work, part of your plan could be to apply to the Museums and Galleries Foundation, the NSW Heritage Office or your local council for a grant, or launch an appeal. Remember that a condition of the grant will usually be that a conservation plan has been prepared.
Step 7: Talk to others

Contact others with experience in managing historic shops (e.g. the National Trust) and ask how they went about looking after their shop.

Step 8: Store and care for the objects

Objects require storage and care that minimises their rate of physical deterioration. Whilst major museums might have sophisticated systems and professional staff to do this, it is possible to achieve a basic level of care with some simple measures. Remember that deterioration of objects cannot be stopped, only delayed, so caring for objects is a continuous process.

These steps may seem like a lot of work when all you want to do is get in and sort the shop out, but they are the best way to make sure that nothing significant is lost in the process of changing hands or closing the shop, and that everyone involved has an agreed process to follow.

A local heritage adviser can provide owners of significant shops with help in planning for changes.

- **Suggestions for shop owners**

Private shop owners can ensure that vital information about the shop and its contents are recorded before any information is lost or the movable contents dispersed. As a minimum, this could include photographing the shop and any individual items associated with its history, and recording their memories about the shop (or those of family and any staff). Where family members divide or sell items, it is a good idea to keep a record of who holds what item, and also ensure that a copy of any information about its provenance and history stays with the item.

New owners should be encouraged to keep significant objects and store or display them as an important part of the shop’s heritage and character.

- **Suggestions for local councils**

The local council can play an important role in identifying and protecting shops in the locality. For example, an original shop front can be retained, even when a shop is being modernised. The council can also provide information about funding or specialist conservation advice, and may be able to assist owners or organisations to develop options for future use of closed or vacant shops. It may also be able to help them find suitable local storage for significant objects, or record and celebrate the local shopping heritage. If the council employs a heritage adviser, they can be a useful starting point to discuss the shop and its heritage significance.

- **Suggestions for community museums, historical societies and community organisations**

Museums and historical societies are often in the position of being asked to acquire items from shops as they close down. Sometimes they are approached because they seem to be the most suitable repository, and sometimes they actively acquire items that fit with the themes of their local history collection. Community organisations therefore have an important role to play as guardians and interpreters of their local community’s heritage, and they need to follow good conservation practice.

- **Suggestions for collectors and dealers**

People who collect movable objects for personal interest or commercial trade are also key players in determining the fate of our shopping heritage. They are often in the unique position of seeing objects and collections come up for sale. If they make sure that the provenance and history of their acquisitions are documented, they are not only enhancing the objects’ value to prospective buyers, but also keeping track of our shopping heritage for future generations to appreciate, long after the shop is gone.
Abikhair’s Haberdashery Store, Albury

When local newspaper stories about Abikhair’s store began to appear in the 1980s, there was a sudden surge of interest in NSW heritage circles. The shop appeared to have changed little since it was established in 1907. Abikhair’s became widely known as a significant part of not only our shopping heritage, but also the history of Lebanese migrants in Australia. When Wal Abikhair, son of the original Lebanese owner, closed the store at 93 years of age, the closing down sale created a flurry of activity by those who sought to save it, including the Albury Regional Museum. In the end, the shop building was afforded local government protection but the intact interior, with its ‘extraordinary clutter of goods’, was not so lucky. Eventually, despite the best efforts of many people, most of the significant items of fixtures, furniture, equipment and stock were either sold off or acquired by the Albury Regional Museum. The new owners were able to acquire a few original features to keep, and the shop itself will continue to sell haberdashery and clothing.

The former Abikhair’s Haberdashery Store in Albury. Museums are not just collectors of objects, they also have a role to play in helping to keep our shopping heritage in situ, documenting it, holding events to celebrate it, and encouraging greater awareness of how to look after shopping heritage under threat. Museums should have sound policies about caring for objects in their possession, including provision for reinstating them (perhaps on loan or by sale) in their original location if the opportunity ever arises. Photographs by Joy McCann, 1999.

The Model Store, Boorowa

This former country emporium has been successfully adapted as a newsagency. The current owner has taken care to keep significant features and objects that were once used in the former emporium. This sign was reputedly written by the original owner, and still hangs in the produce store. It is a reminder that these types of movable items tell us about the way things were done in the past, an aspect of the shop’s history that is not likely to be found anywhere in the formal records! Photograph by Joy McCann, 1999.
Caring for collections

Caring for movable heritage shop collections does not need to be onerous. Most significant objects will survive in the shop for long periods, providing there is some security from theft or vandalism and protection from pests and weather. It may be possible, or even necessary, to keep using significant objects such as counters, furniture and equipment.

Here are some basic measures that are based on good conservation practice for movable shopping heritage:

• Be guided by a conservation plan (see Making a Plan on page 50).

• If changes have to be made (e.g. for health and safety reasons, or to modernise the premises), try to make the changes affecting significant movable objects reversible. Examples include:
  • placing a panel over a painted wall sign, rather than painting over it;
  • laying new linoleum over the old one, rather than ripping it up;
  • storing light fittings no longer required, for later display or reinstatement;
  • placing interesting but redundant equipment, stock or furniture on display.

• Don’t clean, repaint or restore objects if you can avoid it – keep all the signs of age and use because this is part of the heritage significance, although you may need to relocate or protect items that are particularly vulnerable to damage.

• Minimise the possibility of damage or theft.

• Store paper records or other delicate objects safely away from pests, dust and light – perhaps use a safe or strong room on site, or keep books in manila folders wrapped in acid free paper and stored in a filing cabinet.

• Support delicate objects to prevent them from sagging or collapsing over time.

• If building work is planned, record and secure or store movable items for later return (see Recording the Contents on page 45).

• Seek the help of a professional museum conservator for objects that are deteriorating rapidly or where an item is to be restored to working or usable condition.

• Keep a record of any changes or repairs to significant objects – notes and before-and-after photographs are best.

• Keep a record of all maintenance work, including the date and conditions, and keep a copy of this record with the object.

• Regularly monitor and maintain objects, especially if they are being used or are required to be in working condition.
Brennan and Geraghty’s Store
Museum, Maryborough, Queensland

The Brennan and Geraghty’s Store Museum, owned and managed by the National Trust of Queensland, is a ‘museum about itself’. Put simply, the store traces its history within the Maryborough community from 1871 to 1972.

It is a rich and inspiring shop museum. The building and contents have been carefully researched, restored and presented, very much as the store was when George Geraghty and his sister Agnes ran it in its later years. Much of the hard work has been done with the curator and members of the community working together.

As the museum has taken shape, those involved have learnt together about good methods of recording, storing and displaying the contents. They have sought advice from experts. They have held a workshop, inviting people from different backgrounds to share their knowledge about ways to care for a small regional museum collection.

One of the major problems that this museum shares with all small, privately-owned museums is that of limited resources. The museum is fortunate to have a full-time curator who has managed the process of conservation and exhibition. In the end, however, it relies on good planning, opportunities for assistance through the various government grant schemes and private sponsorship, support from many local people and promotional activities to raise funds.

The museum has a collections policy translated into a brochure explaining that items offered by donors are only accepted if they are the types of things once available when the museum was operating as a grocery store.

It also has a conservation policy that gives guidance on the best ways to look after the shop’s contents. Old photographs have helped to determine that crêpe paper was used in the front window displays. (In the early years of the twentieth century, crêpe paper was a popular and inexpensive way to decorate the windows and provide a background for the merchandise on display.) Every item, together with its original location when the shop was acquired, has been systematically recorded.

The conservation policy determined that fragile paper items such as store records needed careful removal, minimal treatment and storage. In some cases, copies have been made for display and research purposes, while the originals are kept safely archived. Shelves are lined with brown acid-free paper, a simple and cheap way to protect objects, as well as keeping the feel of the shop shelves.

A conservation specialist has advised that no special environmental controls are required to protect the shop contents - just regular monitoring and some calico over two of the windows to prevent sun damage.

The shop building was restored using a conservation plan and some fundraising efforts. It has been painted on the outside, but the inside paintwork has been left as it was in the 1930s to keep the feel of the original shop. Naturally, if anything starts to deteriorate, decisions have to made about what to do next. In the meantime, the idea is to do the minimum necessary, based on a lot of thought and planning.

All in all, Brennan and Geraghty’s Store is left remarkably as it was when George and Agnes closed the doors for the last time in 1972. The work was done slowly. Those involved have gained new insights into the history and significance of different objects, as they have carefully recorded and monitored them. This is an authentic shop, not a reproduction, and its history and significance shines because of it.
The Brennan and Geraghty Store now operates as a grocery store museum of itself, with original stock. The fittings and stock accumulated over 100 years of trading were kept intact after the shop closed for business. Very little was thrown away over the years and there are more than 100,000 objects in the collection. Even items lost between the floorboards were recovered during an archaeological investigation before the building conservation began. There is a collection policy not to collect shopping objects removed or sold through the store over the years because the store is already a record of Maryborough’s history and the staff and volunteers don’t need even more objects to care for. Sometimes highly significant objects relating to the store’s history are collected and kept as part of a separate collection and stored away from the store. The heritage significance of the archival records, including stock books, is appreciated by the store and has assisted research into the store’s history and its relationship to people and places in the region. Photograph courtesy of National Trust of Queensland.
Brennan & Geraghty’s Store
Museum Collection Policy

The Brennan & Geraghty collection comprises over 100,000 items, which are all original to the property from when the store was an operating commercial business. The collection makes the museum unique. Brennan & Geraghty’s store is one of only two grocery store museums in Australia that are intact with their own collections.

Do we collect items for Brennan & Geraghty’s Store Museum?
Yes, we do collect items for the Brennan & Geraghty collection. We must be able to identify potentially acceptable items as being the types of things that were once available from when the museum was an operating grocery store.

Because Brennan & Geraghty’s Store is so important for its unusually intact collection, care is taken to ensure that we don’t collect items that are not relevant to the museum.

In selecting material we:
• look for items that date from between 1871 and 1972 (the years that the store operated)
• look for items relating to commerce and commercial history
• look for items in good condition
• do not accept paper based material that has not been laminated
• do not accept metal or paper-based material that has not been coated with lacquers
• do not guarantee to display material.

What sort of material do we collect?
The manager of Brennan & Geraghty’s Store Museum can advise you on the acceptability of an item.

We generally accept:
• items relating to the Brennan & Geraghty families
• items that came from Brennan & Geraghty’s Store
• items that came from the Brennan & Geraghty family houses
• items that are identified as being the types of stock sold from Brennan & Geraghty’s Store (identification takes place by matching material to the original store records)
• items of advertising material – provided that the products being advertised were sold through Brennan & Geraghty’s Store

Do we display all donated items?
Items that are collected are not necessarily put on display.

Items donated, if displayed, may only be displayed for short periods.

In order to distinguish between donated items and the original store items, full documentation of the item has to take place. Cataloguing of donated items is a time consuming task; cataloguing of the donated items must be undertaken prior to them being displayed.

Will your item last forever?
The National Trust of Queensland endeavours to maximize the life span of items donated by storing or displaying the item in the best possible manner dependent on funding and storage space.

Conservation and preventative conservation of an item is a very time consuming and at times expensive process. The National Trust cannot guarantee that any donated item will last forever. Items of low-grade quality material will deteriorate in time.

Do we purchase or borrow items?
Purchase The National Trust does not purchase material for the Brennan & Geraghty collection.

Loan We do not borrow items for display purposes.

How can you lodge material?
Assessment Items can be lodged for assessment and can be received by the staff and volunteers at Brennan & Geraghty’s Store Museum.

Donation Items will be assessed for acceptability prior to being received as a donation, this assessment will be undertaken by the Curator/Manager at Brennan & Geraghty’s Store Museum.

The National Trust of Queensland is approved to receive gifts under the Federal Government’s Taxation Incentives for the Arts Scheme, whereby donors may receive substantial benefits for gifts to public collections.
Putting Shops on Show

Museums and exhibitions, both big and small, play a crucial role in looking after and popularising the history of shops and shopping.

As we have seen, keeping a shop and its contents together and functioning as part of a viable business, is undoubtedly the very best way to look after our shopping heritage. It also ensures that we can maintain some continuity with, and understanding of, our past.

However, when a shop is historically significant, and it simply has to be closed and its contents removed, one option is to consider creating a museum. A good museum is a caretaker of our history, and it is one way of making the shop’s history accessible to everyone.

Shop museums

A shop turned into a museum can be a powerful medium for educating and entertaining visitors. Shop museums are generally those that are significant because they have kept much of their historical character and an intact collection of movable objects.

A shop museum, although perhaps no longer a vibrant living shop, can still speak volumes about the history of a place and its people. Objects and pictures on display, even the setting, all have their own fascination.

A shop museum doesn’t need a lot of additional signs or showcases to work. Add simply written labels and historical fact sheets or stories next to key items, and perhaps have a knowledgeable guide to show people around, and the museum will not only inform and entertain, but also put people in touch with the cultural history of the local community.

Shop museums do require careful management, and a conservation management plan is crucial (see Making a Plan on page 52). Because they already have a significant collection, shop museums are generally closed collections – that is, nothing new is added to the collection at a later date unless it can definitely be attributed to the shop’s history.

Anything else introduced to the museum later (such as items donated from other shops) is not part of this shop’s collection, although they could still be displayed separately and labelled appropriately.
Shop displays and exhibitions

Of course, not every significant shop that closes can be turned into a museum. When the contents of a shop are earmarked for safeguarding and display, they most often end up as individual items or a collection within a general historical museum.

With a reliable method of recording, storing and handling the objects safely, it might be possible to mount an exciting exhibition about the shop, or about the locality and its local characters as a whole. Exhibitions about shopping can also be a clever way of introducing people to the history of shops and shopping, as well as telling the world something about the place where the exhibition originated.

Sometimes, a new owner, a change of fashion, or a change of use, can mean a shop is ripe for the return of its original contents that may have been in the care of a museum or private collector.

Establishing a shop museum or an exhibition using the objects, photographs and stories about shopping, involves a commitment of time and resources. But there are many rewards for communities who succeed in opening a window to their past.

Some principles to remember:

Do as little as necessary
This includes keeping the way a shop is laid out. The meaning and interest lies in the mixture of impressions for the visitor – the smells, sounds and perhaps even the clutter.

Copy old documents and photographs
Place in a folder for visitors to enjoy without damaging the originals.

Label copies or examples in exhibitions
Make it clear to visitors that they are not original to the shop.

Monitor objects
Keep track of objects carefully once they are on display or in storage.

Don’t invent information or recreate objects
Keep the shop and its contents authentic. If you don’t know what an object is or how it was used, ask the owner, older shopkeepers or visitors.

Make your display a ‘closed’ collection
People appreciate authentic history, so make it a policy not to introduce any new objects to a collection or display that have nothing to do with the shop’s history. Think carefully before accepting old stock or other shop objects – you could fill your store several times over and make it difficult to remember which are the original objects and which ones were added recently. Think about putting old furniture and tools of trade back in practical use if it is safe to do so and will not cause too much wear and tear.

Get permission to display any sensitive material
Any objects or material that might be regarded as sensitive or private by the families of shop owners, customers or others should be displayed with care. For example, old pharmacy prescriptions might contain personal information about someone’s health or stock books might contain information on the credit worthiness of families that live in the area.

Use simple display methods
Ask shop museums for simple, cheap methods of looking after and displaying objects that they have used successfully. There is no need to use your precious funds on elaborate museum-standard equipment unless you have sought advice from different experts and there is no alternative.

Aim for a high standard of maintenance and labelling
This will enhance the importance of the shop and its contents.
Wong Sat General Store Collection
Powerhouse Museum

Museums can play a crucial role in looking after the movable heritage of shopping. The Powerhouse Museum acquired a collection of rural Chinese shopping heritage from the descendants of Wong Sat, who established his store on the goldfields route in Bolong in the 1870s. The museum is preparing the collection as a permanent exhibit, and these items now provide rare insights into a nineteenth century Chinese general store. The museum has also collected associated historical information that helps to interpret the items.

Wong Sat General Store Collection
Photograph by Scott Donkin, reproduced courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.

Objects from Wong Sat General Store Collection
Photograph by Penelope Clay, reproduced courtesy of Powerhouse Museum, Sydney.
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and suggestions for further reading

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