Food shopping during the 1800s reflected Victorian Britain’s stratified society. The traditional role of a middle-class woman was to run her household as efficiently as possible, managing the servants and the household budget. In wealthy households, the cook or housekeeper was in charge of day-to-day food shopping, with the baker and the butcher delivering goods to the servants’ entrance. The urban poor bought their food at street markets, from street-sellers and from chandlers.

During the early decades of the twentieth century, as servants became a thing of the past, the middle classes shopped daily for themselves at local shops such as green grocers or butchers. This was a leisurely process which involved being waited on by shop-keepers, and often being offered both a credit system and a delivery service.

Supermarkets

Supermarkets, which took off in Britain from the 1950s onwards, offered a very different type of food shopping experience. To start with, customers helped themselves rather than being served, using see-through wire baskets or trolleys to limit shop-lifting. Due to similar concerns, today’s supermarket customers are constantly under surveillance from close-circuit television. As their name suggests, supermarkets offered a broader shopping experience, allowing customers to purchase meat, vegetables, and household goods all conveniently under one roof. Thus consumers no longer have to visit more than one shop to buy all their groceries.

Today’s small shops

The rise of the supermarket and of out-of-town shopping centres has corresponded with the decline of small independent shops. The state of our nation’s high streets has caused concern about the effect on local communities and economies. Very few of today’s high streets include the kinds of food shops that would have been absolutely standard even a few decades ago: a butcher, a greengrocer, a fishmonger or a bakery. Between 1997 and 2002, specialist food shops such as bakers closed at the rate of fifty per week. On current trends of closure, the Manchester School of Management has predicted that by 2050 there might not be a single independent food store left in the UK. Whereas high-street chains can afford substantial rents, small, independent food shops struggle greatly. Many of the small food shops that continue to survive do so because they have carved out a niche for themselves. So, for example, a butcher that offers well-hung, traceable, organic and free-range meat or a fishmonger selling expertly filleted, sparkling fresh fish. Some people actively choose to support small, local businesses like these, appreciating the expertise and knowledge of the staff and the friendliness of shopping somewhere where your face and name is known.