REFLECTIVE ESSAY SUMMER 2025-26

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1 Introduction

When I first applied to the Laidlaw Scholarship, I assumed it would be a good programme to have on the side of my course studies. I had no idea it would become so much more: a community and network, a summer spent as a researcher under the guidance of an expert supervisor, and opportunities to gain experience and lead through residentials and workshops. Specifically, in Weetwood, I gained access to some of the most valuable learning resources I have ever encountered regarding leadership. It helped me identify strengths and weaknesses I had not seen clearly before and equipped me with practical tools, such as the Workable Range model, that I will bring with me in the future. Energised by these experiences, I approached my summer research with enthusiasm.

Despite this excitement, I was also intimated since the project was into unfamiliar areas of study: Geography and data science. Nonetheless, from the first meeting with my supervisor, Dr. Andy Newing, I could clearly see how closely these topics connected to my Economics and Finance studies. The initial aim of my project was to analyse retail change in Great Britain between 2015 and 2025 using **Points of Interest** (POI) data. While it was clear before researching that Brexit, Covid, and geopolitical instability had major effects on retail, what intrigued me was whether these shocks could be **captured and measured**.

Additionally, as an aspiring entrepreneur, I was especially interested in uncovering the **deeper causes of retail success and failure**. Were the outcomes determined by location (city centre or countryside), the proximity to competitors or complementary businesses, or the type of business model, such as restaurants versus clothing stores? Perhaps they reflected shifts in population needs, like the surge in demand for health during Covid, or the strategies adopted by firms themselves? I also wanted to assess whether the widespread fear surrounding e-commerce, AI, and digital disruption really meant that physical shops were destined to disappear. Therefore, these areas of interest shaped my research questions:

1) What are the retail trends in Great Britain over the past decade?

2) Why have these trends taken place?

3) Are physical shops destined to disappear in the digital age?

However, it became clear from the first week of research that answering them would not be straightforward, and I had to adapt my methodology. I worked with Excel, Power BI, Python and Emeditor with SQL; very professional tools, but the POI datasets were vast and messy, and difficult to manage without mapping software. With limited time to master QGIS, I had to **problem-solve** constantly, switching between tools, **adapting** when methods failed, and **accepting** imperfections in the data. Working with millions of rows of information became as much a lesson in technical skill as in resilience and adaptability. Guided by my supervisor, I added **fieldwork** to my methodology, offering **qualitative** insights to strengthen and contextualise the quantitative analysis. Walking around Manchester, York, and Leeds added the human dimension that numbers alone could not capture; observing shops, analysing their surroundings, and speaking with local people and workers all provided information that helped me answer my research questions. Standing in front of Manchester's shuttered Debenhams or seeing York's Debenhams split between luxury jewellers, brought the data to life. I also developed a sharper awareness of city-centre retail dynamics: looking at which shops drew queues, how close they were to competitors or complementary businesses (such as a flower shop opposite a romantic café in York). Finally, by examining **policy documents**, I gained a **broader understanding** of how **government initiatives can shape or reinforce emerging trends**. For instance, the NHS Long Term Plan illustrates how public strategy aligns with retail movements toward 'health on the high street.' Although this policy is recent and not the cause of the rise in health-focused outlets, both reflect a wider social demand for accessible wellbeing services, suggesting that healthcare and retail together could play a vital role in revitalising town and city centres.

This report is therefore both an account of what I discovered about UK high streets and a reflection on how I learned: not just about retail figures, but about their importance in society, the factors that enable them to succeed while competitors fail, and the resilience and adaptability required in research.

2 Research: methodology, context, and significance

Before delving in a summary of the research findings, it is important to define a few key terms. A **retailer** is a company that sells goods or services directly to the public (e.g. *Boots*, *Debenhams, Sainsbury's*) (Salesforce, 2024). A retail unit refers to the physical space in which such activity occurs (e.g. the shop at *32 Market Street*, *Manchester*). The units of observation in the files I worked with are the **occupiers** of these retail units, meaning the specific retailers operating within them at a given time (e.g. *Boots occupying 32 Market Street*, Manchester). These occupiers are recorded in Ordnance Survey's Points of Interest (**POI**) dataset, a digital record of businesses and services produced by the UK's national mapping agency (Gov.uk,2025).

As previously mentioned, the broader objective of the research is not only to track numerical changes in occupiers (of retail units), but also to interpret the underlying forces driving these shifts. Situating the trends within their wider **economic, policy and social context** enable the findings to inform **businesses** and entrepreneurs seeking to adapt, while also providing insights into the **shifting values and priorities** shaping 21st-century urban life. While it is relatively straightforward to see how retailers reflect economics, business, and policy, the more challenging question is how retailers **interact with society**.

Retail has always been more than commerce; it has **mirrored and shaped community life**. From the Greek agora of 800 BC, where people gathered to trade, debate and govern, to Paris's Galeries de Bois in the 18th century, where strolling and socialising mattered as much as buying, retail has long functioned as a cultural stage (Regan, 2023; Joshton 2019). According to Joshton, while churches once held this central role in European towns, it has now largely shifted to retail centres and high streets, whose importance was made clear during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Retail, therefore, is not just an economic actor but a social force, both **shaping** the communities around it and **being reshaped** by their shifting **demands, values, and expectations.**

Figure 1*: Galeries de Bois, Palais Royal.*
Photograph: Brown University Library (Willsher, 2015)

One of the most relevant themes to emerge from my research was the decline of the traditional department store, epitomised by **Debenhams**. Founded in 1778, Debenhams plc grew into Britain's largest department store chain, with over 12,000 employees. Yet mounting debts, falling sales, and

Covid-19' pandemic forced its closure in 2021, with Boohoo buying only the brand and website. The irony is that while the physical stores vanished, the brand's cultural capital endured: by 2025, Boohoo rebranded itself as the Debenhams Group, proof that the brand outlived the physical spaces. The new occupiers varied, some sites were taken by other large retailers (e.g. M&S), others subdivided for niche retail (e.g. Breitling and Mappin & Webb in York), repurposed for non-retail use (e.g. Gloucester's new university), or stalled in mixed-use redevelopment (e.g. Manchester's Rylands reconfigured into offices with ground-floor retail) (Geolytix, 2023; Butler, 2024) . However, Debenhams' collapse has shown that **the loss of one anchor retailer can destabilise entire high streets,** undermining jobs, property markets, and local identity. The collapse of such a historical store could symbolise the decline of the traditional department store as a dominant high street anchor, with their role now diminished in favour of a more fragmented and experimental retail landscape.

Figure 2: *A Debenhams store in 1906 as a 'social environment' (BBC, 2020)*

The second relevant theme emerged was the **rise of health and wellness** as new anchors, reflecting a cultural and policy shift toward **preventive health and lifestyle**. Over the same decade (2015-2025), while **clothing outlets declined sharply** (52,402 → 42,819, -18.3%), **health-related stores grew** (95,816 → 102,223, +6.7%), showing resilience. The fieldwork confirmed this contrast: on Manchester's Market Street, a shuttered Debenhams was being converted into offices, while just metres away Boots and Holland and Barrett (H&B) thrived as rival anchors confirming that wellness demand is strong enough to **sustain two chains side by side**. The two retailers have rapidly expanded their services since Covid. Boots have benefited from the NHS Long Term Plan (2019) and Pharmacy First (2024), offering blood pressure checks and consultations for seven common conditions. H&B have expanded the range of in store wellness services and advice offered, introducing new store formats centred on wellness.

As illustrated in Figure 3, several retail outlets contracted sharply between 2015 and 2025, with clothing, household, banks, and entertainment venues declining significantly, while food, health, and gyms increasing.

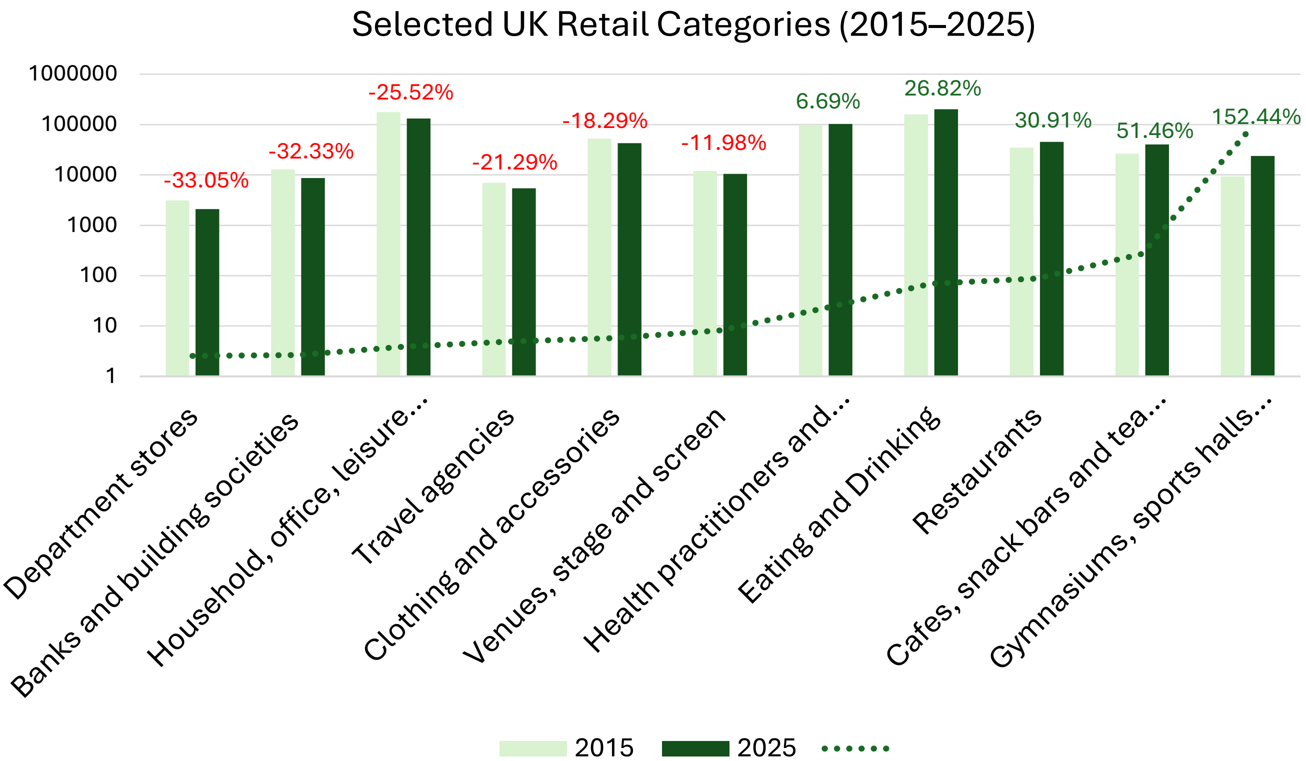

Figure 3*: Diagram illustrating percentage change in occupiers between 2015-2025*
Diagram drawn on Excel from POI data

The causes of retail change are diverse and complex, but three factors stand out: **digital disruption, experience, and adaptability.** E-commerce has shifted many product-based categories online, symbolised by Boohoo acquiring Debenhams' brand but not its stores. Banks have followed a similar path, as digital challengers like Revolut have reduced the need for physical branches. By contrast, the sectors that endured on the high street were those tied to **routine** and **experiences** such as cafés, pharmacies, and gyms. Despite a general decline in bookshops likely due to online competitors such as Amazon, Waterstones has thrived by encouraging browsing and embedding cafés, creating what Moody's describes as experiential retail: spaces that draw customers to linger, connect, and return (Moody's Analytics CRE, 2023). WH Smith, by contrast, has struggled, tied to a more traditional model that offers little reason to visit in the digital age. Gyms, sports halls, and leisure centres have also expanded, reflecting both the rise of the **health and wellbeing trend** and their integration into **people's daily routines**. Finally, **adaptability** also proved vital, the main driver of retail resilience is the ability to pivot **quickly** to changing consumer needs (Moody's Analytics CRE, 2023). For instance, **restaurants and cafés** adapted during Covid by partnering with modern platforms like Uber Eats and Deliveroo, while **travel agencies and banks had little room to adapt,** suffering from digital competitors like Booking.com and Revolut. In summary, **resilience appeared to depend less on products themselves and more on routine, human interaction, and adaptability,** pointing to a **gradual** shift in the high street from goods to experiences centred on living, wellbeing, and community.

3 Impact on my Thinking and Leadership

Working with the POI data was not only a technical challenge but also a test of **emotional resilience**. I began with confidence, thinking that, regardless of the initial setbacks, persistence would soon deliver an answer to the Debenhams question. The datasets were too large and incomplete for Excel, pushing me towards mapping tools like QGIS, which required far more expertise than I could acquire in the limited time available. For instance, crucial details such as UPRNs and coordinates were often missing or changed with each new occupier. Each fault was **uncomfortable**, and occasionally I **wondered whether my efforts in terms of time were merely wasteful**. But looking back, **every new failed attempt led me to the real learning**. I had to learn new tools and organise a workflow that I had envisioned to be more elegant but was still **practical, functional, and mine**. Each small victory such as cleaning a file or making a pattern clearer, increased my skills and confidence. Yet there were also moments of deep frustration: entire weeks of coding in Python or cleaning data in Excel often collapsed into results that made no sense. This was mainly caused by the original dataset, but I still had to keep evaluating my code, hoping the error was mine and therefore fixable. However, in this experience, the philosophy I developed was **to continue, recognising that progress is not linear and treating each problem as just one less to finding the right result.** The data, in a way, were my humbling guide, they showed me my limitations. Without an adequate original dataset, I could not find all the answers I had originally planned, but I learned with resilience that even **imperfect results**, when combined with **other types of data** (e.g., fieldwork and policy) through a **different methodology**, can still be very valuable.

This research demonstrated that just like in leadership it is the best to be **humble and ask for help**. For example, when I struggled with Python and SQL, seeking guidance from my supervisor and peers proved invaluable. Initially, I was hesitant to share my rough work, however, doing so taught me that **clarity** often comes from **sharing your uncertainties to others**. **Listening** was just as important as analysing. In one of my last meetings with my supervisor Andy, I felt frustrated because the data were not giving me precise information, especially with UPRNs and coordinates. When I shared my rough findings, however, Andy pointed out that even this difficulty was a valuable result in itself: it showed that the dataset could not be fully analysed with this methodology, and that future scholars could build on this knowledge by approaching it with different tools. **I had not recognised this as a legitimate finding**. However, since I was eager to uncover more useful insights, Andy encouraged me to redirect my focus toward the health sector rather than continuing with the Debenhams case study. Indeed, after a few weeks of exploring this new area, I discovered a new approach: by filtering through points approximation, I could work around the dataset's limitations and identify trends at the category level. By linking these with policy documents, existing research, and my fieldwork, I was able to produce original insights with a methodology that felt **logical to me,** even if it was different from the one, I had followed all summer. What unlocked this progress was **sharing my rough and imperfect work** with Andy, which helped me see its value and opened the door to new directions. Lastly, on reflection, I feel I gained most by learning to combine **persistence with adaptability**, maintaining **high standards** while **accepting that progress is rarely linear**, especially during a summer that was challenging in many ways.

4 Conclusion

Looking back, I can see how profoundly this research has changed me. What began as an attempt to answer a neat, technical question about retail change became a far deeper process of **confronting mistakes, adapting methods, and learning to value every finding**. I moved from expecting clear answers to learning how to turn complexity, limitation and failure into meaningful answers, through persistence, but also by knowing when to ask for help.

Through this process I gained knowledge about **retail trends** over the past decade, the **deeper causes behind the collapse** of traditional department stores, and behind **the rise of** experiential and health and wellness stores. I learned that **physical shops are probably not destined to disappear** in the digital age, and that **adaptability** is often the most crucial factor in business survival. More importantly, I improved qualities I now recognise as essential to leadership, entrepreneurship, and research: **persistence, humility, genuine curiosity, and the courage and awareness to share uncertainties**. The frustrations of working with the POI data tested my resilience, but they also taught me to ask for help, share rough work, and reframe obstacles as opportunities for change, whether by combining quantitative data with policy and fieldwork or by developing new methodologies. What ultimately sustained me was also **genuine curiosity**: I was motivated by **the direction I was free to give the research,** thanks to my supervisor's flexibility, and by the thought that this research **mattered to me personally**. When the process became difficult, reminding myself of that interest gave me the energy to continue. These lessons will stay with me well beyond this project. Aspiring to become a sustainable and ethical entrepreneur, I am now more aware that success rarely comes from following a perfect plan, but from adapting to what is real, surrounding myself with better people and listening carefully to them.

For society, the findings remind us that high streets have always been not just economic spaces but social ones. This again suggest they will **probably continue to endure, even in the digital era**, shifting always more towards **experiences, well-being, and relationships** while more products move online. I will put the effort in carrying my genuine curiosity into disseminating this research, through **my Laidlaw poster, and potentially through articles and conferences,** to help businesses, entrepreneurs, and institutions gain insights that may support them in this age of change.

The Laidlaw experience has so far been much more than a super-curricular activity: it has been a training ground for both intellect and character, and a **community of inspiring people**. I leave the research not with all the answers, but with stronger tools to keep refining both the questions I ask and the answers I pursue in business, geography, and society. Finally, just as retailers adapt and reinvent themselves, so too can we, and it is **in that reinvention that we grow as leaders and shape the world, turning change not into disruption but into innovation.**

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