John Pearce and the Rise of the Mass Food Market in London, 1870–1930

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For Trevor
and
Caitlin

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David W. Gutzke

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This book is about a specialised and interesting part of the food trade and also a study (unavoidably incomplete) of a striking personality who lived his whole life in catering, changing London for the better in the process. Such an undertaking would have been impossible a decade ago, since all his company records were destroyed after his death. Complicating my investigations of John Pearce, all his competitors likewise preserved no records, except for several minute books. Joseph Lyons & Co. was quite unusual in having a company archivist, who had access to the firm's records and wrote an official history, though soon thereafter all the evidence vanished. Indispensable to my research was the recent digitising of major British newspapers, together with the then prevailing journalistic practices of publishing verbatim accounts of company meetings and annual reports.

Pearce looms so large as a historical figure because he became the quintessential rags-to-riches late Victorian, an astonishing figure whose social mobility many recognised, but whom few could rival. He benefited from having several intimate friends—two became his biographers, while the third served as editor of a leading catering journal—providing insights into not just London's changing catering world but Pearce himself. As a result of spearheading the emergence in the capital of the mass food market, he would become a familiar figure interviewed often in the press, where he disclosed some facets of his life as caterer. Finally, he also fully deserves to be the focus of this study owing to his longevity, remarkable

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Table 1.1 Estimated customers served annually in the city, 1908

Company	*City shops*	*Estimated customers*
Aerated Bread Co. (ABC)	65	24 million
J. Lyons & Co.	57	23 million
British Tea Table Co.	37	10 million[a]
Express Dairy Co.	21	8 million

Source: *Temperance Caterer*, 15 Sept. 1908

[a]The figures for 1908 are the best comparison of all four companies at one time, but by then, Pearce had been forced out of the BTT by a few large shareholders, soon with disastrous consequences—the company heading towards bankruptcy. The number here was considerably bigger in the years 1900–1904, when Pearce served as managing director and the company flourished. One informed estimate in 1905 put the number of its annual customers at 32 million (*South London Chronicle*, 26 May 1905)

commercial success and commanding presence in the lives of lower- and middle-class workers in the City.

In 1908, the *Temperance Caterer* published statistics on the consumption of meals in the City of London that are reproduced here because they come from one of the few direct comparisons among the four big firms in London catering (Table 1.1). The proportion of teashops based in the City for the four largest firms—Aerated Bread Co. (ABC), J. Lyons, British Tea Table Co. (BTT; formerly Pearce & Plenty) and the Express Dairy Co.—is quite suggestive. Two-thirds of the British Tea Table Company's outlets were so located in 1908, far greater than those of the Express Dairy, which had around 50% based in the City. By far the biggest company, J. Lyons, catering more to middle- rather than working-class patrons, had nearly half of its outlets there. Altogether, these four companies ran 180 shops in the square mile, selling 65 million meals annually! Lyons had fewer overall depots[1] than the ABC, but still outsold its main rival: Lyons' 120 depots sold roughly 250,000 meals daily, whereas ABC's 130 depots counted just 100,000 meals daily.[2] The two largest companies, moreover, also catered to many patrons outside the City, giving them a wider customer base than their competitors.

[1] The precursor of the term "restaurant," depot described originally less exalted premises in the mid-Victorian era. Restaurant gradually replaced it, though the two terms were interchangeable until World War I.

[2] *Temperance Caterer*, 15 Sept. 1908; Peter Bird, *The First Food Empire: A History of J. Lyons & Co.* (Chichester: Phillimore & Co., 2000), p. 38; Express Dairy Company, Museum of English Rural Life, 1909 Annual Report, TR EXP/5/3. Slaters and Lockharts were excluded, presumably because reliable estimates were unavailable.

The City's dominance could also be measured numerically. In 1840, the EC postal code—embracing the City—had ranked first, with the most dining/coffee rooms and restaurants, accounting for nearly half of the capital's total. While this preponderance gradually declined during the next seven decades, the City still held over one-fourth of the total before World War I. In second place stood the Western postal code, where almost one-fifth of these establishments conducted business.[3]

John Pearce—involved in the revolution in retailing food in late Victorian London—has never received any detailed historical treatment. By writing about his business career, it is possible to set it against the development of the whole industry without going into considerable biographical details of his life, which remain sketchy and often unknowable, given limited available evidence. Pearce's career thus must be placed in a wider historical context to understand his role in pioneering the mass food market in London.

This approach also enables me to contribute to the growing literature on the concept of consumption. To broaden our understanding, historian James Obelkevich recommends that scholars engage in "detailed empirical research on … a particular group of consumers." In studying Pearce's companies as well as those of his competitors, this book illuminates changing consumption patterns for workers in the City of London, the birthplace of the mass market, over a half century.[4]

Scholars point to the years after 1850 as critical in the "revolution in retail distribution," and three factors indicate its catalysts: "new products and innovations in product manufacturing with changes in distribution channels," improved transportation and storage facilities, and emergence of the mass market in large urban areas fostering the development of multiple branches.[5]

While scholarship on the retail revolution is extensive, little serious investigation exists on the narrower concept of the mass market. In an early study (1966) on the social history of diet, John Burnett said nothing either about John Pearce or about the mass market, instead stressing

[3] Brenda Assael, *The London Restaurant, 1840–1914* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 19–20.

[4] James Obelkevich, "Consumption," in James Obelkevich and Peter Catterall (eds.), *Understanding Post-War British Society* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 142.

[5] G. Shaw, "The Evolution and Impact of Large-Scale Retailing in Britain," in John Benson and Gareth Shaw (eds.), *The Retailing Industry*, vol. 2: *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1800–1945* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), p. 251.

Lyons' establishment of teashops in the 1890s.[6] Several subsequent historical studies, however, would break new ground in suggesting the pivotal role of a new concept—the mass market—in transforming retailing.

W. Hamish Fraser, in his *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850–1914*, identified three developmental stages of the mass market.[7] Hawkers, fairs and street markets had flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century. "The street," Fraser wrote, "was the last refuge of the unemployed and the unemployable, the artisan who had hit hard times, the drunkard, the blind, the limbless." Little capital required and credit easily available with a loan from a pawn broker, penny capitalists burgeoned in numbers, particularly in London. Mobility, moving from place to place to what they called "stands," was one of their chief features. Mid-Victorian London social investigator Henry Mayhew estimated some 30,000 costermongers sold a wide array of goods—fish, fruit, vegetable, game, poultry and flowers.

Distinctly second, London street traders (4000) catered to those working-class denizens whose homes had no cooking facilities and so purchased food cooked on the spot, together with a beverage of astonishing choice—ranging from tea, coffee, cocoa and ginger beer to lemonade, elder cordial, peppermint water, rice milk and even fresh milk. "The poorest section of the working class" consumed the poorest quality of food, only escaping detection as often inedible or noxious owing to lax government oversight in an era of laissez-faire. Seen in a broader context, these Londoners, one step above the residuum, engaged in what contemporaries regarded as the "luxury trade" in which workers proved capable of buying "take out" meals. John Pearce became part of this broad group when he opened a mobile coffee stall, dubbed "the Gutter Hotel," in and around East and City Roads in 1866. Reflecting changes in the nature of catering, coffee stalls would be renamed coffee bars, which went well beyond offering a standard fare of coffee and "snacks." Plaice, haddock, sole and whiting, especially popular with the working class, sustained some 300 street fishmongers. Cheap and readily accessible, herring sales topped 875 million annually. These astonishing sales, too, preceded founding in

[6] John Burnett, *Plenty and Want: A Social History of Diet in England from 1815 to the Present Day* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1966). A later book likewise ignores the mass market as a concept, though the author employs the term itself (John Burnett, *England Eats Out: A Social History of Eating Out in England from 1830 to the Present* (London: Pearson Longman, 2004)).

[7] W. Hamish Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850–1914* (London: Macmillan Press, 1981), pp. 94–109.

the 1860s of what became a central institution for slum dwellers—fish-and-chip shops. Another group, comparable in numbers to street traders, sold diverse manufactured products—metal, glass, china and cloth. Unlike food retailers, this group preferred barter, not cash. Two final groups were numerically less critical but still important: sellers of street literature and a diverse, miscellaneous group of thousands defying easy generalisation.[8]

Bigger shops with more diverse stock and larger premises constituted the second stage of the mass market. To achieve this more enviable level, stationary shopkeepers required more capital than their peripatetic predecessors—the greater sums still remained quite small. At one extreme stood the Roberts' family in Edwardian Salford, the semi-skilled, working-class father investing £40 of his savings in a corner shop, stocked from nearby larger shops for £2. In what became a familiar pattern for such shopkeepers, the father continued working for wages, while his wife ran the shop and presumably benefited if the family became more prosperous as a result. For Londoner John Pearce, an unskilled labourer with more meagre savings (Fig. 1.1)—a week's salary of £1 earned from an herbalist shop—rental of a barrow cost 1s. weekly, his largest outlay. Given a slow start in which his morning's earnings for six months averaged just 30d., he took a part-time job as a packer earning 10s. for a 36-hour work-week to tide him over until business picked up. Social investigator Charles Booth learned that a London shopkeeper netted on average £2 15s., whereas John Pearce earned initially about one-fifth this amount. Steps upward in social mobility could involve small increments, requiring improvised strategies of survival.[9] By the 1870s, Pearce had the insight and saw the

[8] Ibid., p. 95; Burnett, *England Eats Out*, pp. 39, 44; John K. Walton, *Fish and Chips and the Working Class, 1870–1940* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 23; Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (Griffin, Bohn & Co., 1861): vol. 1: *The London Street-Folk*, pp. 160–207; S. J. Adair Fitz-Gerald, "Chats with Caterers: John Pearce," *Caterer and Hotel-Keepers' Gazette*, 16 Jan. 1905, p. 14; Marguerite Williams, *John Pearce: The Man Who Played the Game* (London: Religious Tract Society, 1928), pp. 92–3.

[9] John Benson, *The Penny Capitalists: A Study of Nineteenth-Century Working-Class Entrepreneurs* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1983), pp. 115–16; Rev. James J. Ellis, *Pluck, Patience and Power: The Life Story of John Pearce of "Pearce and Plenty"* (London: H.R. Allenson, [1910]), pp. 62–3, 65, 70, 75, 77; Charles Booth, *Life and Labour of the People of London* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1903), 2nd series, vol. 3: *Industry*, p. 254; Robert Roberts, *The Classic Slum: Salford Life in the First Quarter of the Century* (Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1971), p. 15.

Fig. 1.1 Gustave Doré wood engraving, "Coffee Stall—Early Morning" (1872)

potential of expanding through satellite stalls, with trained managers hired to oversee other stalls, not surprisingly called "Gutter Hotels" (Fig. 1.2).[10] Such branches were an echo of the general development of multiples—retail chains owned by the same company.

Expanding numbers of "multiples" marked the third stage of the mass market. Nothing was new about companies forming branches—called "multiples"—since the grocery and provisions trade had first pioneered

[10] *Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1905.

MR. JOHN PEARCE AT HIS COFFEE STALL.

This is from a photo taken when Mr. Pearce had a stall in City Road. He saved £1,200 of his earnings by it.

Fig. 1.2 John Pearce at his "Gutter Hotel" coffee stall (City Road) in 1866 (Reproduced by permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library)

the concept. One of the first, Walton, Hassell & Port in London, counted thirty branches in 1870. What made the 1870s–1880s a distinct departure was that multiples exploded in numbers in these trades as the level of unemployment dropped. "The multiples were the shops of the mass

market," observed W. Hamish Fraser. By 1885, thirty-one firms owned ten or more branches, with eight running at least twenty-five.[11]

Multiples embraced standardisation in design, products, value, service quality, and above all, branding as methods for differentiating themselves from competitors. "Multiple retailing developed where consumer convenience was significant," commented Michael Ball and David Sunderland in their economic survey of nineteenth-century London. The commercial imperative for establishing branches as a tactic for expanding business reflected the assumption that, regardless of how retailers packaged their products at one central site, growth would inevitably reach a maximum, even if premises became larger, more diverse and more attractive.[12] Establishing department stores, in contrast, assumed that people would travel a long way if they had a wide enough choice when they reached the store.

Scholars cite several factors as vital to promoting the rise of multiples from the late Victorian era: increasing imported foodstuffs, factory production and a new business philosophy. Central to multiples' marketing strategy was limiting the range of goods sold to enable purchasing in bulk, providing profits derived from minuscule transactions based on high turnover. In meat retailing, a profit margin of 0.5% seemed satisfactory; in John Pearce's mass catering to London's working class in the 1880s–1890s the figure was vastly higher—2.4%, five times the meat retailing's margin of profit per unit. To the Royal Commission in 1897, John Pearce explained what mass catering meant in practice: "We serve six customers in Pearce's houses before the person that has the capital in the business receives a farthing in dividend." None of his other houses rivalled the original Pearce and Plenty on Farringdon Street, where a huge staff of 50 preparing food and dispensing it almost with lightning speed fed some 6000 patrons daily, who ravenously devoured steak pudding, potatoes and mug of cocoa for 6d.[13]

Multiples emerged in specialist retailing, initially with W.H. Smith and the Singer Manufacturing Co. before spreading to other trades—footwear, grocery and meat. By the 1880s–1890s, the concept appeared in

[11] Fraser, *Mass Market*, pp. 111–18; *Daily Telegraph*, 27 March 1905; *Pearson's Weekly*, 5 Sept. 1914.

[12] Michael Ball and David Sunderland, *An Economic History of London, 1800–1914* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 134–35.

[13] Ibid., p. 136; *Evidence of the Royal Commission on Liquor Licensing Laws*, 1898, 36 (Cmnd. 8694), pp. 242, 244.

tailoring and patent medicines.[14] According to D.J. Richardson, "the dramatic rise of the multiples in the retail food trade established a pattern which was followed in many respects by catering." J. Lyons, for instance, distinguished itself in the 1890s in emulating the business strategy of earlier multiple caterers in the 1850s.[15]

In embracing uncomplicated shop fittings and introducing "standardised branch stock control systems," multiples achieved superior standards in quality as well as in service. In generating custom, premises "were attractively laid out and kept immaculately clean."[16]

Advent of the mass market in London from the mid-1870s drew meagre scholarly interest until A.E. Dingle's 1972 ground-breaking but largely ignored article. He advanced a compelling thesis in which he identified rising purchasing power, accessibility of consumer goods and stable beer retail prices as three essential causes. Consumer choice widened with imported foodstuffs, such as grain, meat, bacon, dairy products and fruit. Many consumer goods industries now industrialised, enabling inexpensive mass-produced boots, shoes, clothing and food processing to enter the market. Another development—the revolutionising of retailing and distributing practices—fostered falling prices, on the one hand, and rises in both real wages and demand, on the other. As the range of consumer goods broadened still further, consumer choice burgeoned in the 1880s. In the years 1860–1875, as prices fell while employment levels continued, real wages soared by 92%. Retail prices of beer, however, remained unchanged at 3d. per pint, inducing its consumers to see that their standard tipple had become relatively more expensive compared to an increasingly diverse array of consumer goods. The economic imbalance between 1875 and 1890 in which employment and money wages tended downwards while prices fell faster and real wages continued to rise prompted drinkers to switch purchases from beer to new consumables, explaining why beer consumption stagnated from 1876 rather than continuing its rise. Summarising the impact of these changes, John Burnett, in his *England Eats Out: A Social History of Eating Out in England from 1830 to the Present* (2004), argues that "there had been a substantial filtering-up

[14] Ball and Sunderland, *History of London*, pp. 134–35.

[15] D.J. Richardson, "J. Lyons and Co. Ltd.: Caterers and Food Manufacturers, 1894 to 1939," in Derek J. Oddy and Derek S. Miller (eds.), *The Making of the Modern British Diet* (London: Croom Helm, 1976), p. 161.

[16] Ball and Sunderland, *History of London*, p. 136.

from the lower ranks of labourers towards steadier, better-paid employment, and … more working-class families were beginning to enjoy an improved more varied and nutritious diet." Increasingly customers purchased consumer goods as prices fell faster than money wages. Stable beer and coffee prices now seemed relatively more expensive compared to new consumer goods, so the working class, formerly purchasers of alcohol and coffee, switched to buying consumer durables. Dingle's article was thus seminal, the first scholarly study to recognise the mass market as a concept and offer a persuasive thesis explaining its emergence.[17]

New types of coffee public houses in the 1860s–1880s, mimicking pubs in every way save in selling alcohol, suggested to some scholars that late Victorian temperance reformers had discovered a novel method of retailing—mass catering. Two broad reform groups emerged: those drawing on strong temperance convictions, whose lack of business acumen doomed such ventures, and a smaller but more commercially minded group, which elevated profits over philanthropy. None achieved true mass catering in London.[18]

Recently, Andrea Broomfield, in her *Food and Cooking in Victorian England*, maintains that from coffee public houses begun in the 1870s came "a corporate business model that worked," serving as the basis for commercialised catering.[19] In fact, at most qualified success characterised their efforts, as Chap. 2 on coffee public houses demonstrates. Those entrepreneurs with temperance roots who survived broke with prevailing policy, introducing ideas based on the innovative approach of massive volume sales with miniscule profits on each transaction—the dominant philosophy of multiple shops.

An entirely different case for coffee public houses' impact comes from the career of Ronald McDougall. A transplanted caterer to London in the

[17] A.E. Dingle, "Drink and Working-Class Living Standards in Britain," *Economic History Review* 25 (1972): 608–22; A.L. Bowley, "Changes in Average Wages (Nominal and Real) in the United Kingdom between 1860 and 1891," *Journal of the Statistical Society* 58 (1895): 225, 251–52; Burnett, *England Eats Out*, p. 40.

[18] The concept of mass food catering first appeared in Dublin, where chef Alexis Soyer established a vast soup kitchen capable of feeding 1000 people per hour in 1847 (Andrew Langley, *The Selected Soyer: The Writings of the Legendary Victorian Chef, Alexis Soyer* (Bath: Absolute Press, 1987), pp. 31–4). Just the Liverpool British Workman Public House Company achieved mass catering. See Chap. 5, note 2.

[19] Andrea Broomfield, *Food and Cooking in Victorian England: A History* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2007), p. 56.

late 1870s and early 1880s, he assumed management of a coffee public-house company, the People's Café Co., which achieved remarkable—indeed astonishing—success. Interviewed in 1912, some three decades after massive market changes, he claimed he alone had initiated London teashops, one vital source of mass catering. Half a century later, historian Kathleen Heasman independently reached the same conclusion.[20] McDougall's case for achieving mass catering is debunked in Chap. 3.

Who then deserves credit as having achieved status as the first mass food caterer in Victorian London? Four traits were necessary to reach the level of being a mass food marketer: number of multiple branches; volume of daily meal sales; class of the clientele; and whether the company served hot meals (which entailed several courses), not just light refreshment.

Smaller catering companies doing business in the City are easily discounted from consideration. Numbers of multiples as well as volume of substantial hot meal sales disqualified both Slaters and Lockharts. Slaters had opened just one London depot in 1889, soon after the advent of the mass market, so sales it achieved at this one site could not—by whatever criteria—qualify as catering to the "masses." Lockharts, in contrast, having appeared in London in 1883 with its first shop, established multiples on a vast scale thereafter, opening another fifty-three houses in London alone by 1888. To earn recognition as a mass caterer, however, Lockharts needed to specialise in selling hot meals with joints of meat and vegetables, not just light fare—sandwiches, sausages, pies and pastry—on its menus throughout the 1890s.[21]

Was a more persuasive case possible for the largest catering companies? In a 2006 essay, three scholars contend that both the Aerated Bread Co. (ABC) and Lyons were responsible for having "revolutionised eating out." "By achieving large-scale production techniques, and standardising conditions, products, service and prices," the ABC and Lyons "dramatically transformed … the nature of catering." Compelling evidence for this thesis, however, is lacking. Bereft of data of total meal sales, the authors rely instead on Kelly's *Directories* of London, which enumerated total numbers of ABC depots but which offered no insight whatsoever into

[20] Kathleen Joan Heasman, "The Influence of the Evangelicals upon the Origin and Development of Voluntary Charitable Institutions in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century" (University of London, Ph.D., 1959), p. 300. Though this thesis was the basis for her subsequent book, only the dissertation cited sources.

[21] See pp. 52–3.

what the company sold on such premises. Had the authors looked further, they would have discovered other evidence supporting an entirely different conclusion. The ABC, which had established depots from the 1870s, had enough multiples with seventy shops (1889) to stake a claim as initiating mass catering, but several defects disqualified it as having in fact "revolutionised" dining: it concentrated on attracting not masses of workers in the square mile, but lower-middle-class white-collar workers, together with those securely in the middle class; and it offered them its own version of "light refreshment"—bread, cakes and pastry. "Cakes and pastries," not sizable hot meals with meat and vegetables, Pearce knew, still characterised the ABC menu in 1897, when he testified before the Royal Commission on Liquor Licensing.[22] That same year in an interview in the *Caterer*, a reporter described the ABC's menu as consisting of little more than "tea and buns." Baroness Orczy's mystery stories, collected, published and entitled *The Old Man in the Corner* and set in an ABC shop (Norfolk Street, off the Strand), capture the Edwardian atmosphere of respectability, with her unescorted female journalist, Miss Mary J. Burton (*Evening Observer*), drinking tea and conversing with a nearby armchair detective, who sips milk with a bun or cheesecake while solving crimes (Fig. 1.3).[23] Lyons comprised an altogether different case from the ABC. "Through our teashops we were largely responsible for revolutionizing catering in London by introducing good and inexpensive food in clean and cheerful surroundings," argued its in-house magazine long after the transformation.[24] Indeed, Bird, as his conclusions and preconceptions stated clearly, entitles his chapter "The Restaurant Revolution."

Yet, he offers no information whatsoever about total meal sales at Lyons teashops. Nothing else could have more conclusively addressed whether Lyons did in fact revolutionise catering in the 1890s and early 1900s.

[22] Gareth Shaw, Louise Hill Curth and Andrew Alexander, "Creating New Spaces of Food Consumption: The Rise of Mass Catering and the Activities of the Aerated Bread Company," in John Benson and Laura Ugolini (eds.), *Cultures of Selling: Perspectives on Consumption and Society Since 1700* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 86–8; Dora Greenwell McChesney, "The World of the ABC," *Daily Mail*, 15 Apr. 1903; *Evidence on Liquor Licensing Laws*, 1898, p. 240; A. Jepson, "The Coffee Tavern Movement in London," *Supplement to the Temperance Caterer*, 10 Sept. 1887; *Temperance Chronicle*, 15 Aug. 1906.

[23] "A People's Caterer," *Caterer*, 15 Jan. 1897; Baroness [Emmuska] Orczy, "The Fenchurch Street Mystery," *Royal Magazine* 6 (May, 1901). The ABC's appeal to higher social strata first came in 1906 (*Financial Times*, 6 Nov. 1906).

[24] J. Lyons & Co., *Lyons Mail*, Oct. 1934, Acc. 3527/230, London Metropolitan Archives.

Fig. 1.3 Solving Crime at an ABC, 1901 (Baroness [Emmuska] Orczy, "The Fenchurch Street Mystery," *Royal Magazine* 6 [May, 1901])

Surely such data would have survived when Bird came to write his company history, though as an unofficial archivist, not a trained historian, he perhaps lacked appreciation of this topic's overall importance. Within the City through its teashops, Lyons catered chiefly to London's middle class, a prosperous clientele which could afford costlier meals than those socially below them. Such meals fell far short of what workers wanted—hot, generous portions of meat and vegetables. "There was almost no cooking except for toasting … and [it was] warmed on hot plates," commented John Burnett. At its teashops, Lyons thus catered to those seeking light refreshments. Between 1894 and 1900, Lyons multiples expanded from three to thirty-seven. In targeting primarily bourgeois male patrons in the City, Lyons sacrificed mass food sales—dependent on service as quick and

as rapid as consumption—for greater profits.[25] We are left therefore with aggregate numbers of teashop openings and company profits and dividends as sole indicators of Lyons' claim as a mass caterer. Evidence of Lyons' pioneering mass caterer is simply non-existent: its universal appeal spanning the propertied classes really pre-empted its role as a mass caterer to the masses. Pearce earned his inevitable reputation as a mass caterer with his 3d. meat pies, whereas Lyons a decade later offered patrons mutton pies at 7d.[26]

No one but John Pearce thus fulfils the four traits requisite for establishing the leading part in spearheading London's mass food catering. In gradually transiting from coffee stall vendor to coffee house proprietor, he spent thirteen years (1866–1879) acquiring experience, capital and novel ideas for competing in an intensely competitive market. Accumulating investment funds proved daunting but not insuperable: first, he began humbly at his "Gutter Hotel" coffee stall, where eventually he generated £6 pounds of business daily, working between 4 a.m. and 8 a.m.; then he bolstered business and profits with other satellite "Gutter Hotel" coffee stalls in which he installed managers; and finally on selling this business he received £200 for the stall and its custom, which, together with his savings of £1000, provided the financial nucleus for opening his first depot at 58 Aldersgate Street in 1878, commencing his career's second stage. Here, we know, Pearce–displaying immense self-confidence—gambled it all, investing his entire life savings, £1400!

To supplement his depleted funds, he entered the hotelier business at 84 Farringdon Street, building the first "poor man's" temperance hotel atop a new depot in 1882. Strategically, this constituted a shrewd decision: his sixty beds produced enough revenue covering the entire building's rent; and his profits from daily sales of 6000 meals generated £1000 annually (1882–1886).[27]

Just one depot (together with a hotel) sustained him until 1886 when, with Sir Edward Sullivan and others as investors, he formed a limited liability company in what became Pearce & Plenty. Inevitably the result of

[25] Bird, *First Food Empire*, p. 43, and Appendix 4; Evidence of the Royal Commission on Licensing (England and Wales), 11 Apr. 1930. The Commission's evidence was printed but never published.

[26] Burnett, *England Eats Out*, p. 124.

[27] "Coffee-Stall Crisis," *Daily Telegraph*, 3 Apr. 1901; John Pearce, "'I Started Gutter Hotels': Founder of the Famous Poor Man's Restaurants," *Pearson's Weekly*, 5 Sept. 1914; *Coffee Public-House News*, 1 Feb. 1883.

overstretched investment funds delayed his expansion and was crucial to his endurance: it enabled Pearce to withstand the mass market's turbulent arrival early in the 1880s; and it avoided a financial crisis owing to plummeting sales (as in McDougall's case).[28] When Pearce & Plenty became established with a capital of £20,000, three more depots duly appeared in the City the following year. Slow entry into the City's market constituted one vital reason for Pearce's persistence. Thereafter, expansion came quickly, as multiples became an integral part of Pearce & Plenty: they counted twelve (1889), and then, twenty-two (1896). In achieving this level, Pearce met one criterion for qualifying as a mass food caterer—formation of satellite branches called multiples. Now he entered the third stage of his career.

Total meal sales tell their own story about John Pearce as a mass caterer. Whether insisting on freshly brewed coffee or meat pies, steamed rather than boiled, witty advertising or going upmarket in search of a new clientele, Pearce was committed to innovative practices throughout his career. None of these matched in either imagination or conceptualisation, however, his role in instituting mass catering on an unprecedented scale. Long before Lyons' so-called teashop revolution began in 1894, as Bird would have it, Pearce was selling more than 30,000 hot meals daily in the City, soon rising to 65,000 (Table 1.2). By 1905, his two companies were serving 120,000 patrons, not just light refreshments offered by his competitors, but hot substantial meals daily, at 84 depots largely in the City and its surroundings to Londoners (Table 8.3). By whatever rubric, this ranked

Table 1.2 John Pearce and the mass market's arrival in the City of London, 1887–1905

Year	*Daily meal sales*	*City depots*
1887	14,000	4
1889	30,000	11
1896	65,000	46
1898	70,000	52
1905	120,000	84

Sources: See Tables 5.1 and 5.2

[28] Cost of outfitting a new depot, even in a rudimentary style, was far beyond the savings of the former Gutter Hotel proprietor. As the depot opened on Farringdon Street in 1882, Pearce had to find between £700 and £800, a sum which almost equalled what he had saved in thirteen years as a coffee stall entrepreneur ("Pearce's Coffee Bar, Farringdon Street, London," *Coffee Public-House News*, 1 Feb. 1883).