Discussion of the 20th century rise of Marks and Spencer as the first classless, genuinely mass-market retailer often takes the company’s public floatation in 1926 as the effective starting point for detailed analysis of the transformation of its managerial philosophy and scale of operations. The present paper, however, uses material from the Marks and Spencer archive to focus on the company’s fluctuating fortunes during the two decades prior to 1926. In so doing, it reveals the scale of the task taken on by Simon Marks and Israel Sieff in their efforts to create a successful company on the foundations of an operation which initially appeared in serious danger of becoming commercially and geographically marginalised.

Martin Purvis is Senior Lecturer in Geography at the University of Leeds. Martin’s interests in the historical geography of retailing initially focused on the 19C development of consumer co-operation. After a period spent pursuing other research interests in urban geography – and some years as Environment Faculty Pro-Dean for Student Education – Martin is now working on a new project exploring the diversity of retail development in inter-war Britain. His most recent retail publication is Purvis M (2015) ‘Direction and discretion: the roles of centre and branch in the interwar management of Marks and Spencer’, History of Retailing and Consumption 1(1): 63-81.