

ELLEhighstreet

As I sat at Cardiff Central train station, my insides danced with nerves and exhilaration. I'd got my carefully chosen ensemble of second-hand Levi's, Smiths T-shirt and red Kickers past my stepdad by saying I was going on a school trip. I'd lied. In my bum bag was enough money for a return train ticket, a can of Coke (eating would have to wait) and £20 for a pair of oxblood Dr Marten loafers I'd seen in *Just Seventeen*. It was 1989, I was 14 and on my way to London. Destination: Shellys Shoes.

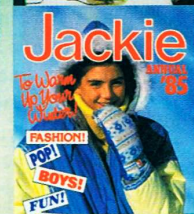
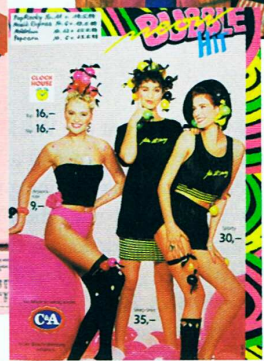
I'm pretty sure that that was the moment I fell in love with the British high street, though I'd clearly already had a serious crush. My hometown of Cardiff had served me well. I had wrung out every drop of shopping pleasure from its high street and three malls. My girlfriends and I bought our first AA-cup bras in Tammy Girl, then defected when we realised we were B-cups at Dorothy Perkins. We coveted sailor hats and Pepsi & Shirlie puffballs at Topshop; make-up and Lycra dresses at Miss Selfridge; diamanté brooches and sateen tops at Clockhouse, and military-blazers at Chelsea Girl. We bought them all, giggling in the fluorescent-lit changing rooms as we went. For us, the high street was a destination in itself, an escape where our money bought us independence and respect. We'd agonise over what to wear to the shops on Saturday, then go shopping for clothes to wear to the shops the following Saturday. Leaving parents at home with their household chores and *Grandstand* on TV, it felt like the high street belonged to us.

Desperately unhappy at home – thanks to a tricky relationship with my mum – I sought refuge in shopping come the weekends. School was just something that happened in between, and social events were simply an opportunity to wear my purchases. I fantasised about the stores credited in *Just Seventeen* and *Mizz*. Hennes (later to become H&M), Flip, Jeffrey Rogers and the much-feted Kensington Market were all on my wish list.

Our high-street habits started to change. Newly acquired Saturday jobs saw our income sky-rocket, and with it our tastes developed. Suddenly, our £20 per garment cut-off point was a moveable feast. Sure enough, that first runaway trip to Shellys proved the first of many pilgrimages to London's high streets. There was a skipped sports day and a train to Hyper Hyper on Kensington High Street. I picked up a Boy London cap – the celebrity staple of the day – in return for a whole month's allowance. I then saved for weeks to buy a £30 Vivienne ➤

WHY THE 1980s HIGH STREET STOLE MY HEART

From Chelsea Girl to Hyper Hyper, Sali Hughes reflects on her long love affair with British high-street shopping



Westwood T-shirt at her World's End shop on the King's Road, ecstatic that I finally owned a bona-fide designer garment. But my personal mecca was Pineapple in Covent Garden. In the grip of Lycra mania, I read the dancewear catalogue every night before bed. I decided on a navy stretch minidress (costing an unprecedented £39.99), and found myself next to Kylie Minogue (before she was 'Kylie') at the matching leggings rail. It's still my most thrilling star-spot to date.

The late 1980s saw me trawling Topshop for hot pants, Millets for MA1 flight jackets, Warehouse for wide stretch hairbands, and HMV for band T-shirts. We read *The Face* and stuck its fashion pages on our walls. Music determined your style: casual (Stock, Aitken & Waterman pop), trendy (Blow Monkeys and Pet Shop Boys), indie (Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses) and B-girl (Neneh Cherry and Beastie Boys). Ever the navel gazer, I embraced Morrissey and the indie scene, lock, stock and DM boot.

'Second-hand' (rebranded 'vintage' years later) was huge. Long before eBay and fashion-savvy Oxfam, charity shops hid gems for pennies. Selvedge Levi's, biker jackets and 1940s tea dresses were there for those prepared to roll up their sleeves and dig. A local store displayed rows of jeans-filled cardboard boxes, where hoards of teens would permanently stand riffling for their Saturday-night outfits. My beloved grandma's brown suede jacket, still smelling of Yardley lavender scent, became the envy of my friends when teamed with a micro mini and red lipstick.

New money for old clothes was just one eccentric shopping habit to astound our elders. My friend Clare fell out with her mum when her faded, ripped jeans returned from the wash neatly patched with horrid blue denim. A 'no pointy slip-on' rule at school set off a craze for DMs customised with anything and everything – lace, ribbon, Grolsch bottle tops. Twee regulation gym bags were binned in favour of Benetton (or the new, extravagantly chic Next) carrier bags. Acid-house Smiley T-shirts were forbidden, but not before my best friend and I wore them to the school disco, worn with cut-off jeans, and paisley bandannas flapping about our wrists. Dancing to Bananarama and sipping contraband vodka and lemonades, we were oblivious to the drug-fuelled rave culture we seemed to be celebrating. Our rebellion was minor, but we felt triumphant, rightly predicting we'd be the talk of our school for weeks.

On to fashion college in London, a part-time job at Gap plus

a lethal cocktail of student loans, employee discount cards and a West End location. Oxford Street became my local high street and was like the mother ship calling me home. At Gap, I learnt the painstaking art of T-shirt folding (surely karma for years spent unfolding Benetton jumpers). Never again would I dump hangerless dresses into changing-room assistants' arms. But it was here that I made life-long friends, our silly working hours bringing us closer, like a makeshift retail family. After work, my colleague Sarah and I would browse the Regent Street shops together. We'd talk heartbreak in the queues and she pestered me to date her brother, who'd just moved to London. During one late-night shopping raid, she laughed out loud as I revealed I'd been offered a job as a fashion assistant on a magazine and wasn't sure whether or not to accept it.

Mercifully, I came to my senses and off I went, wearing an olive-green Jigsaw number (people with proper jobs shop in Jigsaw, I thought). Now in a world of press gifts, VIP discounts and catwalk shows, labels began to sneak into my high-street wardrobe. In any case, it was becoming harder to see the joins. The high street was getting more daring. Fashion was becoming all-inclusive, designer and high street developing more equal standing. It felt like the end of an important chapter in my life, like I'd taken off the stabilisers.

My love for the high street now is as strong as ever. No gloomy day can't be fixed with a little something from Reiss or French Connection. As for Topshop, what hasn't been said about its reinvention? But I'm grateful I knew it back in the day, like a small-town boyfriend who became a movie star. Despite looking terrible for much of my youth, I feel honoured to have grown up in those innocent times – no pressure, no red carpet, no internet shopping with Daddy's credit cards. We had to be creative with the limited choices on offer and we lived for the challenge. A trip to Topshop today can easily give you a top-to-toe catwalk look to rival a front row in Paris. You just

don't get 17 girls all turning up in the same Miss Selfridge wrapover top any more, raging hormones masked by The Body Shop Dewberry perfume. Maybe that's a good thing. But it made us feel part of something. A trendy, soul girl, indie kid – you picked your team and your shops and felt bigger than the sum of your humdrum, provincial parts. I miss that. As for my Gap colleague's brother? Let's say in return for years of loyal custom, the high street did me the ultimate service. It gave me my husband. ■

SHOPS WE HAVE LOVED AND LOST

CHELSEA GIRL A teen essential, giving us everything from cropped denim jackets to jersey snoods. The chain became River Island in 1988.

CLOCKHOUSE AT C&A A neon-hued oasis, Clockhouse championed ski pants, plastic jewellery and bowties. The last C&A store in the UK closed in 2001.

HYPER HYPER A legendary showcase for young British designers, including Pam Hogg, Boy London, BodyMap, Flip and the first-ever branch of Office Shoes. This Kensington High Street giant was as famed for the fry-up in its vintage railway-carriage cafe as for its fashions. It closed in 2001.