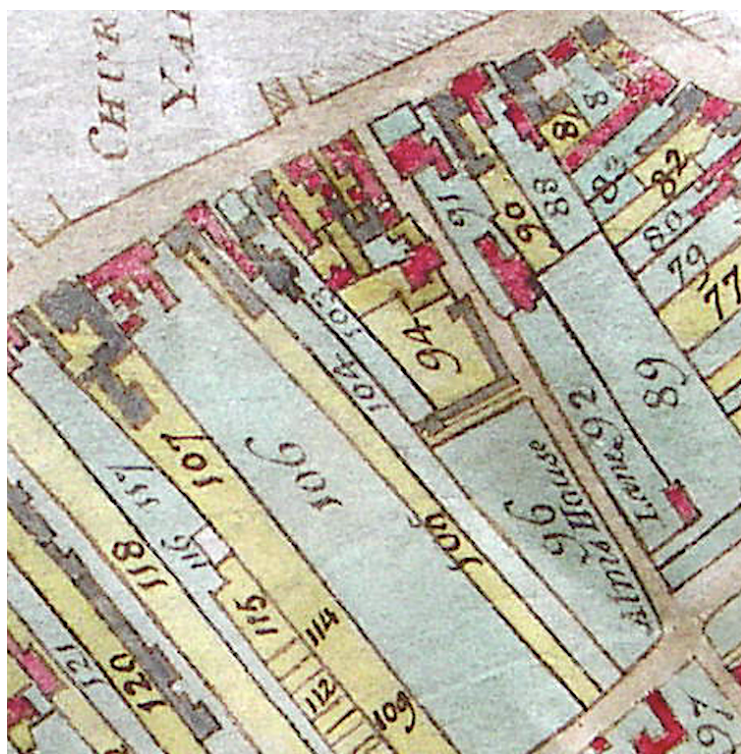


A new future for BHS, Wakefield 2022

At the heart of Wakefield

The site where the former BHS store stands is right at the heart of Wakefield. It is opposite the parish church, now the Cathedral, where there has been a church since before the Norman Conquest. The three routes into the town from west, north and south still meet in this southeast corner of what used to be a large open market place. Some of the earliest institutions of the town were sited here, making the street frontage between today's Little Westgate and Almshouse Lane the ancient centre of power in the town. This was originally called part of Westgate, but by the time street numbering came in during the late 19th century it was re-numbered as Kirkgate.



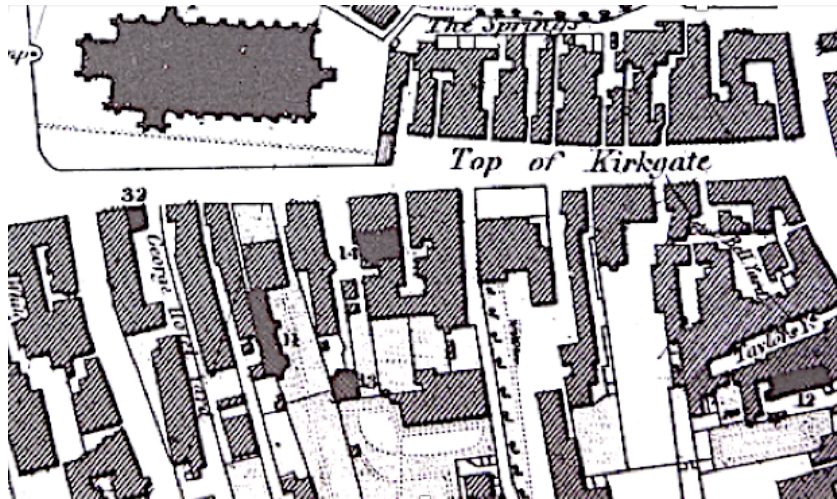
[Image 1] Detail from enclosure map of 1790s of Westgate (later Upper Kirkgate)¹

The enclosure maps of the 1790s provide the first detailed plans of the town. You can see the pattern of the long narrow burgage plots of one acre allocated to the townsmen after the charter of AD 1180, which granted the townspeople the rights to buy and sell in the lord's lands and freedom from control by the Manor of Wakefield. Even after much subdividing and consolidation of plot ownership over the years, the pattern of plots can still be seen. The maps were accompanied by a notebook listing details. Plots 104 and 105 are where the BHS building is today.

To the east of the BHS site were the administrative buildings of the huge Manor of Wakefield, which stretched up into the Pennines, covering over 100 square miles. The manor court met in the Moot Hall and the court's records, dating back to 1274, were stored on the site in the Rolls Office. Also here was the home of the Bailiff, the main official of the manor. It eventually became another inn, the Manor House Inn.

¹ West Yorkshire Archive Service, Wakefield enclosure map 1790s, QD5/3/Vol4/28

The Moot Hall was also used for the meetings of other courts, including Wakefield medieval burgess court, the court of Wakefield's rectory manor and the quarter sessions of the West Riding. Public meetings were also held in the Moot Hall, and it was here that in 1788 Wakefield citizens met to call for the end of the slave trade.



[Image 2] Extract from Walker's plan of Wakefield in 1823

Key:

- 11 West Riding Register Office
- 12 Clerk of the Peace's Office, West Riding
- 13 Rolls Office (Manor of Wakefield)
- 14 Manor Bailiff House (actually the Moot Hall)
- 32 Excise Office, George Hotel

Other official offices operated nearby. The West Riding magistrates ran the criminal courts and the administration of the county. Up to 1778 their records were kept by the deputy clerk Richard Mawhood at his home at Plot 105 on the enclosure map, but then a separate Quarter Sessions office was created (shown on Walker's map of 1823 at 12).

Another West Riding function established in 1704 opposite the parish church was the Registry of Deeds. This was built on plot 103 where M&S now stands (shown on Walker's map of 1823 at 11). Its purpose was to provide security for West Riding landowners by recording all transfers of freehold property. In 1932 the Registry moved to a new building in Newstead Road and is now at the West Yorkshire History Centre.



[Image 3] Original Registry of Deeds on Upper Kirkgate ²

² © Unknown

By the time the manor's power had faded away and the court ceased to meet in 1913, civic functions had already migrated to the area around Wood Street, which was opened up in the very early years of the 1800s. The new court house was followed by other civic or public buildings, including the Music Saloon, the Dispensary, the Town Hall, the Wakefield police station, the Agbrigg police station and County Hall, leaving Upper Kirkgate as a street of shops and inns.

The BHS site in 18th and 19th centuries



[Image 4] Ordnance Survey, 5 feet to one mile, surveyed 1848, published 1851

The antiquarian John Leland who travelled around Britain in the early 1540s said of Wakefield 'The building of the toune is meately faire, most of tymbre but some of stone.' But by the time that maps and written records become more available, the forerunner to BHS and its neighbours had already been rebuilt in brick, presumably in the mid-late 18th century. BHS was to take the place of the Golden Lion and part of the tailor's next door (numbered 14 and 16 Upper Kirkgate from about 1890). They stood on long thin plots facing onto the parish church. The main building on the site that later became BHS had become the Golden Lion by the 1820s.

An inventory taken in 1860 at a change of licensee lists in great detail the furniture, utensils and stock, down to every last blanket, chamber pot and glass. The contents were valued at £202-1s-2d (£202-6p)³. It only had 5 bedrooms, so it was small compared to the George Hotel next door to the west. In the 1911 census the Golden Lion was recorded as having 12 rooms, as against 28 rooms at the George.

There was no space to run long distance coaches like the large inns, but it did have a weekly carrier on Fridays to Ackworth. So its profits must have relied on the bar and dining room takings and the meetings it held for organisations such as the Grand Orange Order⁴ and the

³ West Yorkshire Archive Service, C861 box5 no7

⁴ Wakefield Journal, 16 July 1853

Wakefield Friendly Woollsorters Society⁵. In 1862 a new licensee Mrs Elizabeth Shillito advertised good stabling and lock up gig houses, in spite of the limited space in the narrow yard behind the inn⁶. Censuses show there was also one house of four rooms in the yard behind the Golden Lion.



[Image 5] The motorcade of King George V and Queen Mary on their visit to Wakefield in 1912 passes the Golden Lion and the George Hotel on the right of the photo⁷

Life in Golden Lion Yard was dangerous and insanitary: the 4 or 5-year-old son of milkman Mr Johnson fell and broke his arm in 1848⁸; the 5-year-old daughter of John Lockwood died in 1868⁹; Fred, the 2-year-old son of Edwin Crawshaw died in 1869¹⁰. Innkeepers too had shorter lives than we expect today: Mary the wife of John Vitty died aged 42 in 1858¹¹; Thomas Sidney died aged 47 in 1863¹².

Even small inns were good businesses and men were keen to take over the licence by marrying innkeepers' widows. After Thomas Sidney of the Golden Lion died in 1863 at the age of 47, George Britton married his widow Elizabeth in 1866 and took over the licence until his own death in 1889.



[Image 6] The proposed new front of the Golden Lion in 1878

⁵ Wakefield Journal, 6 February 1863

⁶ Wakefield & West Riding Herald, 5 September 1862

⁷ Wakefield Library, Twixt Aire & Calder, photo xl10389

⁸ Wakefield Journal, 23 June 1848

⁹ Wakefield Journal & Examiner, 25 September 1868

¹⁰ Wakefield Journal & Examiner, 1 October 1869

¹¹ Wakefield Journal & Examiner, 19 November 1858

¹² Wakefield Journal & Examiner, 13 November 1863

George Britton carried out alterations in 1878, with further improvements in the following year, that combined two rooms on the front behind a smart new frontage, and added a bay window to the bar parlour¹³.

The Golden Lion continued as an inn until in February 1934 no application was made to renew the licence because of the impending demolition.

The property to the east was occupied by tailor and woollen draper John Crossland by 1867. By the time of the census in 1881, his son John William Crossland seems to have taken over the business and enlarged it, employing 5 men, 4 women and 2 boys. Complaints that he was ineligible to vote in an election in 1888 because he lived at Pinderfields, show that he was no longer living over the shop but like many shopkeepers had moved out of the city centre to a more comfortable suburban home. Crosslands were followed by 1891 at 16 Kirkgate by another tailor, Robert Parker Green, and a successor business was there until the early 1930s.

Changes in the 1930s

Wakefield's medieval street plan, with its narrow yards and streets, became clogged with increasing motor traffic in the 1920s and 1930s. And the old ways of shopping were changing too, with the beginning of larger shops selling a much wider range of goods.

From the late 1920s Wakefield Corporation began to plan to widen the streets to enable those changes, buying up property and agreeing new building lines so streets could accommodate the increased traffic.

In the early 1930s the buildings at 14, 16 and 18 Kirkgate were swept away and two major new stores were built in their place: British Home Stores Ltd and Marks & Spencer Ltd. Their main frontages were set back from the existing street line, allowing for the whole line of Upper Kirkgate to be set back when adjoining stores were also re-developed. In the meantime, the stores were allowed short-term leases to have single storey extensions at the front. These were referred to as 'bungalow fronts' leases.



[Image 7] M&S with its single storey extension can be seen, but BHS is hidden behind the jutting out George Hotel, 1936-1954 ¹⁴

A Wakefield Corporation Act 1938 was secured from Parliament to raise the finance for a variety of further improvements, including 'Street Work No. 10. A widening and improvement of Kirkgate on the south side.' A Book of Reference lodged at the Town Hall on 19.11.37 for citizens to consult, listed all the owners, lessees and occupiers of property that would be affected by the Bill. Every property in Upper Kirkgate was already owned by the Corporation¹⁵. A City Development Sub-Committee, discussing the Bill on 14.3.38, was told that the work was timetabled for late 1941-1943

¹³ West Yorkshire Archive Service, WWD9/25/1573; WWD9/28/1786

¹⁴ Wakefield Library, Twixt Aire & Calder, photo xl10717

¹⁵ West Yorkshire Archive Service, WWD1/Box 268/TB358

but 'this may extend slightly into 1944 owing to various dates of setting back single storey erections.'¹⁶ In the event, World War II held up redevelopment, and further work on demolishing properties on Upper Kirkgate and setting back the line of the new buildings couldn't re-start until the early 1950s.

British Home Stores Ltd

British Home Stores Ltd (BHS) was first registered as a company in 1928 and the intention from the start was to develop a chain of large stores selling a variety of goods (then called bazaars) in major shopping centres.

The ethos of the day was to 'buy British', and the name 'British Home Stores' appealed to consumers' patriotism. Principal lines included clothing, household goods such as lighting, and groceries. Following the Woolworth's business model they sold goods at restricted prices, but within a broader price range – '3d. to 5s.' rather than Woolworth's restricted '3d. and 6d.'

BHS became a public company in 1932. The company was growing very fast, first in London and then across the country. There were 27 stores by 1935 and 37 by 1936, of which one was the Wakefield BHS.¹⁷

Marks & Spencer Ltd (M&S) next door to BHS came to Upper Kirkgate by a very different route but had a similar focus on British goods and quality. It started as a market stall in Leeds run by Polish immigrant Michael Marks. By 1894 he had invited Thomas Spencer to be his partner and they went on to open many stalls in the north of England¹⁸. Wakefield trade directories show that they had 4 shops in the City Market by 1904, 7 shops in 1908, had added a shop at 146 Kirkgate by 1922 and moved to a more central one at 26 Kirkgate by 1927.

Not everyone was happy about the big new stores: John Bowman, draper of Belle Vue, worried about the future of his own business when he wrote to his son on 2nd January 1935 'We have a new store just above Marks and Spencers in Kirkgate and a larger one - British Stores Ltd. One of Wadsworths' daughters is running them so we shall be all stores after a bit. Marks and S have built a larger place just above their old place and this new one bought the next property above and pulled down the old Golden Lion Hotel and built there. Then there is another shop opposite Wool Kings called "Victor" cutting things very keen in our line. So we look like having a lean time still.'¹⁹

BHS looked after their staff. In each case, the stores occupied a single level on the ground floor, with the stockroom and staff rest rooms (including a dining room and kitchen as well as cloakrooms) above, an arrangement just like contemporary Woolworth stores. In 1937 BHS introduced a staff pension and life assurance scheme.

¹⁶ Wakefield Library, Local Studies, Wakefield Corporation Minutes 1937/8

¹⁷ <https://buildingourpast.com/2016/04/10/british-home-stores-part-1-1928-39/>

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marks_%26_Spencer

¹⁹ Unpublished letter, information from Lorraine Simpson, editor of *Diary of a Wakefield Man: John Edward Bowman 1868-1953*, Wakefield Historical Publications 2022



[Image 8] Ordnance Survey, six inches to one mile, surveyed 1938, published 1947



[Image 9] Demolition of the George Hotel and removal of single storey fronts at BHS and M&S starts in 1955²⁰

When work to demolish properties on Upper Kirkgate began again in 1955, BHS was surrounded by demolition of the George Hotel on one side and of further properties the other side of Marks & Spencer. At this time the single storey extensions to the fronts of BHS and M&S were removed so that the long-proposed set-back street line was achieved. At the same time an extension was added to BHS.²¹

²⁰ Wakefield Library, Twixt Aire & Calder, xl05585

²¹ <https://buildingourpast.com/2016/04/16/british-home-stores-part-2-the-1940s-and-1950s/>



[Image 10] Wakefield Cathedral reflected in the glass façade of BHS in 1983

In 1983 BHS was revamped and expanded to link into the new Ridings Shopping Centre when it was created, keeping the store at the heart of Wakefield shopping. On the side facing onto the precinct it had an impressive new glass front²².

In 1986 BHS merged with Mothercare and Habitat to form Sir Terence Conran's Storehouse Group. The stores were rebranded as BhS (with a so-called 'flying h'), but the revamp was not successful.

In March 2000, Storehouse sold the BhS chain to the entrepreneur Philip Green – who had recently failed in a bid to take over Marks & Spencer. At the time of Green's takeover there were 155 BhS stores nationally, and the chain had been making losses for some time. In 2015 Green sold BhS to Retail Acquisitions Ltd for a nominal sum of £1 and there were attempts to save a proportion of the stores. However, the discovery in March 2016 of a huge deficit in the pension scheme led to administration on 25 April 2016. The administrators were unable to find a buyer for the business, and all BHS stores closed by August 2016.²³

A new chapter for BHS

The end of BHS opens the way for a new phase in the life of the site. Out of town retail, the advent of indoor shopping centres and the growth of online shopping are all changing what we need from our high street. Leisure and culture are becoming an important draw to visitors. The new Museum and Library for Wakefield is the latest change to happen to this part of our city centre, together with a new public square to bring new life to Wakefield.

²² Wakefield Library, Twixt Aire & Calder, xl11586

²³ <https://buildingourpast.com/2016/04/21/british-home-stores-part-3-1960-to-2016/>