

# How Sunday trading changed the UK

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<http://news.bbc.co.uk> 27/08/2009

**Fifteen years ago, Sunday trading laws were introduced that led to a national love affair with shopping. The "day of rest" was never the same again.**

The biggest transformation has been since the early 1990s, when Sunday was still a day that commonly began with church worship, followed by roast lunch with the family and time at home together.

"Sunday was a very symbolic day. It was a religious day and even for those people who are not religious it was a family day, a home day. So the idea of going out to the shops on this home day was genuinely shocking to people. You were supposed to spend the time at home, however boring it was. It was considered to be good for you. You were showing loyalty to the family."

For many people today, that is still the norm, but a piece of legislation that is 15 years old this week has made Sundays generally more active and varied.

"Going to the shops became an event, even if you didn't buy anything, because you'd go and you'd walk around and have coffee."

## British legislation

Although some shops had defied the law, the 1994 Sunday Trading Act allowed all smaller shops in England and Wales to open all day. Larger ones are still restricted to six hours of business between 10am and 6pm and cannot open on Easter Sunday. In Scotland, shops determine their own hours. People working in retail and betting can opt out of working on Sundays if they wish.

The trading act was passed despite stiff resistance from trade unions, religious groups and even some large stores such as Marks and Spencer and Waitrose. So when the law was finally passed, it was a huge step, says Professor Jeremy Baker, of ESCP Europe Business School. The act helped to develop a new shopping culture and a new leisure pursuit, he says, but at a cost. However, shops in many towns and villages remain closed on Sundays, and in those areas little has changed.

But shopping malls and city centres are as busy as any other day. More than half the population regularly goes shopping on a Sunday, which

means that hundreds of thousands of people have to work.

## A NATION OF SHOPPERS

- 53% of people regularly shop on a Sunday
- An estimated 14% of consumers expenditure, including online shopping
- Sunday is eBay's busiest day
- 421,000 more people work Sundays than pre-1994 (*From Verdict*)

## Sunday shopping dangers for workers.

John Hannett is general secretary of trade union Usdaw. He fears that premium payments for staff would gradually disappear has come true. And he questions whether voluntary opt-out still applies, because of subtle pressures that can exist at work.

## Sunday shopping dangers for families.

"We've lost family life and one of the reasons we've lost it is that we have lost the principle that Sunday was for the family. There's a moral, social and economic element to this. I love sport but I reject the need for sport on a Sunday because people need a break. There are six other days to watch football." says John Roberts, director of the Lord's Day Observance Society. "If mum is working and dad is down the pub and the other members of the family somewhere else, then family life is sliced through."

But feminist Kathy Lette, says Sundays are much more fun now than in 1988, when she moved to England from Australia. "It has definitely made life easier for working mothers, she says, because trying to fit in the food shop after work or on a busy Saturday is an ordeal. Working mums need options - and Sunday shopping has been a life saver."

## Conclusion

Peter Lynas, of Keep Sunday Special, thinks the law was a compromise that has worked reasonably well. "It has retained a certain distinction to Sundays but at the same time it respects the rights of people who want to go shopping and those that don't."