

Where are they now? Memories in store as we recall cheap chains

Food discounters such as Aldi and Lidl continuing to rise in popularity, increasingly cost-conscious savvy shoppers are no longer ashamed to be seen shopping in discount stores.

Before the German giants of groceries came along, there were a number of other “stack it high and sell it cheap” food retailers in the UK, **Steve Cain** fondly recalling seven of our favourite discount food stores.

With a combined turnover of 18.9 billion pounds, discount stores Aldi and Lidl are now major players in the food retail business. Given their popularity today, it's easy to forget that they were not an immediate success in the UK. “Customers were initially resistant to the unfamiliar brands and no-frills experience,” said retail consultant Graham Soult, “It took a while for both retailers to better understand the UK customer.”

However, as Graham points out, an increased emphasis on “being cheap at the same time as offering really good quality,” combined with the credit crunch in the late 2000s, “meant that more people were willing to give them a go.” He added: “Being seen to save money by shopping there even started to acquire its own cachet – being an Aldi or Lidl shopper became cool, rather than something to be embarrassed about.”

So, why then did some of our favourite discounters of yesteryear disappear? “Many of Britain's defunct discounters didn't necessarily fail,” said Graham. “They were just taken over and rebranded by larger rivals on the hunt for an opportunity.”

How many do you remember?

KWIK SAVE

Founded by Welsh entrepreneur Albert Gubay in 1959, Kwik Save originally traded under the name of Value Foods. Based on buying a limited range of products

and selling them cheaply, the company flourished and had 13 stores by 1967. Traditionally Kwik Save traded on a no frills basis – No Frills even became the name of the company's value own-brand range – with warehouse style wooden shelving, basic checkouts, narrow aisles and charges on carrier bags, which was largely unheard of at the time.

By the early 1990s, the retailer had more than 750 stores throughout the UK. At the end of 1994, the company acquired a further 117 stores from a takeover of ailing food discounter, Shoprite. Subsequently, this resulted in the closure of 107 of the worst performing branches in the combined portfolio, late in 1996.

In spring 1998, Kwik Save merged with Somerfield. While some of the larger, more successful Kwik Save stores received a refurbishment and were rebranded as Somerfield, it was felt that many did not lend themselves to the Somerfield image and so continued to trade as Kwik Save.

In 2006 Somerfield sold the Kwik Save brand – and the remaining 171 stores trading under the name – to BTTF, although the company was placed into administration eighteen months later. By this time, only 56 Kwik Save stores existed and they were taken over by FreshXpress.

In 2012, the Kwik Save brand was bought and re-launched by Costcutter as a convenience store, with the first store opening in Bolton.

NETTO

Danish-based discounter Netto arrived in the UK at the end of 1990, with a style and concept similar to that of its main rival, Kwik Save. Many prices were similar to wholesale prices and to ensure fairness, certain lines were limited to six units per customer. In July 1994, a price-war broke out over tinned baked beans, which resulted in Kwik Save reducing the price of a 425g tin to only 5p in order to compete with an



Netto, Durham Road, Birtley (photo: Graham Soult)

aggressive pricing policy instigated by Netto and Aldi.

By 2010, there were 193 stores throughout England and Wales – all of which were bought by Asda for £778 million. By the end of 2011, all of the Netto stores bought by Asda had been re-branded.

In mid-2014, a joint venture with Sainsbury's saw a new Netto store open in Leeds. Plans to open a further 15 stores throughout Northern England by the end of 2015 fell short and, by the summer of 2016, all 13 stores were closed.

AXE

A mid-1970s joint venture between an Italian food retailer, PAM, and Hintons, a small supermarket company based in North East England, Axe was a chain of approximately 30 stores equally divided between the North East and the South West. The connotation of the company name and logo suggested



Axe Stores, Cowick Street, Exeter, 1987 (photo: Stephen Wilkins)



Kwik Save, Festival Walk Shopping Centre, Spennymoor (photo: Neil Naunton)

chopping prices.

The stores were generally regarded as rather untidy, with stock displayed on pallets and in boxes, rather than on shelving. In 1978, after experiencing "policy disagreements," PAM bought Hinton's out to go it alone. In 1987 the loss-making company was sold to management and folded shortly after.

WALTER WILLSON

Founded in 1875, under the tagline "The Smiling Service Store," Walter Willson was the great grocery name of the coalfield. With a store in virtually every pit village in the North East of England, there were a total of 104 shops by the time Walter de Lancey Willson, first Baronet of Lemmington, died in 1907.

Subsequent baronets gradually sold off many of the shops and the name finally disappeared in 1998 when All-Days bought out the re-

maining 48 stores.

SHOPPER'S PARADISE

Shopper's Paradise was the discount arm of Fine Fare and stores were largely stocked with Yellow Pack budget own-label range, the first of the own-brand value ranges to be introduced in the UK.

Parent company Fine Fare was Britain's third biggest supermarket, after Tesco and Sainsbury's until it was bought by Gateway in 1986. By 1988, all Fine Fare and Shopper's Paradise stores had been rebranded as Gateway. However, Gateway, itself, was subject to a rebrand in 1990 when all stores were renamed Somerfield, in an attempt to create a more up-market image.

An audacious attempt to become one of the UK's top five food retailers saw Somerfield merge with Kwik Save in 1998. However, the

alliance was an uneasy one which hindered rather than helped Somerfield's success. In July 2008 it was announced that Somerfield was to be acquired by the Co-op and the takeover was completed in early 2009.

LIPTONS

In 1871, Thomas Lipton used his modest savings to open his own shop in Glasgow. By 1888, his empire had grown to an incredible 300 stores, located mainly in small towns throughout Britain. Liptons was acquired by the Argyll Group in 1982 and the stores were rebranded as Presto.

FOOD GIANT

Originally part of the Gateway chain, the first Food Giant opened in Nottingham in 1991. All stores were rebranded as Kwik Save following a merger of parent company, Somerfield and Kwik Save in 1998.



Walter Willson, Market Place, Wetherby (photo: Wetherby Historical Trust)