

Michael Marks

In 1878, a young man called Michael Marks left Slonim, the small town in Polish Russia where his father was a tailor, and joined the growing exodus of Jews who were evacuating **economic hardship** and **increasingly ferocious anti-Semitism**. He was 19. He landed in Hartlepool with little English and less money. He signed up for a pedlar's pack and eventually wound up in Leeds in 1884. There he became a sales rep for Isaac Dewhirst, a clothing entrepreneur with a reputation for employing refugees. Dewhirst lent his young visitor **5 pounds to get started**, and soon Marks had saved enough to pay for his own pitch, a trestle in the open market at Kirkgate, twice a week.

In 1886 he married Hannah Cohen and in the same year hired a permanent stall in the new covered market in Leeds. He sold all sorts - nails, screws, pins, needles, buttons, soap, anything handy - and to save time haggling with customers and make himself stand out he came up with a brave marketing slogan. '**Don't ask the price...it's a penny.**' It was a brilliant move - goods flew off the stall as fast as he could pile them up.

Marks was not slow to see that he was on to a good thing. He opened similar penny stalls in Warrington, Birkenhead, Wigan, Bolton and Manchester, before he realised he needed help to run such a widespread operation. Dewhirst declined his offer so he joined forces with Dewhirst's cashier, Thomas Spencer. It was 1894, and a great British chain - Marks & Spencer - was born. By 1903 there were 40 shops across Northern England, 4 years later (by which time Spencer had died) there was 60. But it was hard work and the effort caught up with Marks: he died in 1907, at the age of 48. It was left to his son Simon to canonize the founder as **St Michael**, stitching his name into the labels of the firm's V-necks and the fabric of the nation. Other Jewish immigrant journeys from rags to riches would create Moss Bros and Burton.