

## Forget eBay and Amazon. It was a Gateshead pensioner who started the online shopping revolution



New documentary shows how online shopping industry was launched in 1984 from Jane Snowball's armchair

**Jamie Merrill**, Sunday, 15 September 2013

If there is such a thing as an online shopping hall of fame, you won't find Jane Snowball placed next to Amazon's Jeffrey P Bezos or billionaire eBay founder Pierre Morad Omidyar. That could be about to change, because the Gateshead pensioner has been revealed as an unlikely retail trail-blazer who kicked off the online shopping revolution.

A new documentary will tomorrow show how the online shopping industry, now worth £87bn a year, was launched in May 1984 from Mrs Snowball's armchair on the Leam Lane estate with an order for eggs, margarine and cornflakes. The industry that now sees a staggering 1.3 billion online shopping deliveries a year and has transformed the face of the high street started with a 72-year-old using her television to shop "online" from home – seven years before the internet was commercially available.

The latest episode of Robert Peston Goes Shopping reveals how Mrs Snowball was part of a pioneering local council initiative designed to help the elderly and infirm. It used a ground-breaking Videotex online-shopping system to create a shopping list of basic items through her television. That list of items was sent via her phone line to a local Tesco store, which were then picked off the shelf, delivered to her door and paid for in cash. Reportedly, Mrs Snowball picked up the system in 15 minutes and thought the invention was "wonderful".

The inventor, Michael Aldrich, said "it changed the world of shopping" and made "shopping functional and stripped out all the theatre". He added: "Mrs Snowball never saw a computer, Mrs Snowball saw a television. Her connection to the television was a remote with an additional button that said 'phone'. What effectively we did was take a domestic television and turn it into a computer terminal. It was 1984 and we were doing online shopping. It was amazing and she loved it."

Her eldest son, Alan Snowball, 76, now lives in Co Durham and told *The Independent on Sunday*: "My mother was a very bright woman and well versed in the technology behind the system, but she wouldn't want any praise. She did it for the sake of doing it and really just enjoyed the process, as in those days you never really knew what you were going to get at the front door."

Mrs Snowball was one of the first silver-surfers and died in 1995. Today, she would have had a choice of half a dozen online grocers, while Tesco alone now receives up to half a million food orders online every week.

This week Morrisons, the last major supermarket without an online delivery business, announced on Friday that its new delivery service, backed by a £200m investment, would go live in January. Meanwhile, a new industry study from the Institute of Grocery Distribution released last Thursday predicts a continued shift toward online food shopping, with a 126 per cent increase in sales over the next five years bringing sales to £14.6bn.