

**Brian W Harvey**

**The Law of  
Consumer Protection  
and Fair Trading**

**Second Edition**

**Butterworths**

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## Preface

Recent years have seen a rapid increase in the volume of legislation to protect the consumer against not only fraud and dishonesty in commercial dealings but also against oppressive bargains and dangerous products. There is widespread public interest in 'consumerism' and an increasingly large number of professional and lay people are expected to be able to give advice on consumer problems and help to formulate consumer policy. Commercial litigation, at least as described in the leading textbooks on mercantile law, tends to be concerned primarily with disputes between business concerns, shipping companies and the like. There is a growing school of thought which holds that consumer protection law is at best only distantly related to commercial law, and it is legitimate as a separate exercise to focus on transactions between suppliers and the ultimate consumer. From that perspective it is fruitful to analyse the civil rights and duties and the criminal liabilities to which these transactions give rise.

What precisely should be covered by a comprehensive account of 'consumer protection law' is, as is the case with administrative law, for instance, the subject of legitimate debate. For present purposes I have looked at the body of law which exists to protect the private consumer from (a) unsafe products, (b) qualitatively deficient goods and services, (c) fraudulent trading practices, (d) insufficient information, and (e) economic exploitation through lack of competition or excessive prices. To understand the working of the law it is also important to examine the voluntary or statutory provisions for giving the consumer redress when he has a legitimate complaint, whether it be against a nationalised industry or a producer of goods or services in the private sector. From this vast field I have necessarily had to be selective, particularly as to services. It could be argued, for instance, that the

machinery regulating state welfare benefits is partly there to protect the consumer of these benefits, and certainly that public licensing systems relating to everything from taxi cabs to betting shops is an aspect of consumer protection. But the line has to be drawn somewhere, and the above topics are better dealt with in the specialist works that already exist. For this reason I have also ignored the protection given to purchasers of land under section 76 of the Law of Property Act 1925 (implied covenants for title) since this is a specialist topic appropriately left to textbooks on Conveyancing, and the same considerations apply to the complex body of law protecting various types of tenant from eviction or payment of excessive rent. In many of these more technical areas the 'consumer in the street' will often rely on professional advice, and if matters go wrong his first line of attack will be against his professional adviser – an aspect of consumer protection fully dealt with in this book.

In the preface to the first edition of this book I mentioned that when this book was originally written there was very little published work intended for practising lawyers, law students and trainee or qualified trading standards officers, treating the whole field in some depth. Since then a number of books have been produced and we seem to have moved from famine to abundance in a very short time. In addition the comparative absence of published material on the relationship between law and economics in this field no longer applies, and the burgeoning interest in this interdisciplinary field in the UK is encouraging. I originally justified the treatment of the social, political and (particularly) economic context of the laws and institutions concerning consumer protection in an introductory way by stating that 'many law students will not have studied economics before, and, with a few distinguished exceptions, authors of academic law books in England have given their readers little encouragement to think about the relationship between law and economics. Whilst extreme statements which would deny the study of law any normative role or intrinsic intellectual interest at all are to be deplored, a moment's thought will show that both parliamentary and judicial law-making rests on certain usually unexpressed economic or socio-political premises. Evaluation of a particular law's merits or demerits should not rest entirely on whether it appears to work well. It is also necessary to estimate the effect that any consumer protection law will have on, for instance, the economics of the production of the particular goods or services in question, and on consumer behaviour generally. It would be possible, given sufficient space, to deal with this wider dimension in far greater detail than I have

done, but I have both kept it in mind and tried to deal with it in a way comprehensible to the person without any previous training in economics.'

Consumer protection is a vast field, much wider perhaps than is generally realised. If one adopts the definition of the consumer adapted from the Molony Report and discussed in Chapter 1, it includes not only an examination of the consumer's civil rights in respect of the quality of goods and services but also a large number of statutes imposing criminal liability on producers and retailers for conduct detrimental to consumers. The field would also be incompletely covered without some material on competition policy, so closely linked with the Office of Fair Trading, and there is a survey of this in Chapter 11. But the picture presented here cannot within the permitted space available be exhaustive, and others might have varied the emphasis within the topics chosen or varied the topics themselves. In this new edition I have taken the opportunity of expanding some of the economic and contextual background, of looking at the position in other jurisdictions (including developing Commonwealth jurisdictions where the problems and priorities in the field are difficult), greatly expanding the treatment of product liability and, of course, bringing the text up to date in numerous respects. I have also corrected a number of errors and omissions in the original text. The basic structure of the work otherwise remains unaltered. The aim is to produce a balanced treatment of this large field which I hope will continue to be of use to practising lawyers, law students and those working as trading standards officers on whom the effective enforcement of much of the law discussed depends.

There are many others now working in the consumer advice field and in bearing their needs in mind I am assuming, as experience suggests, that they can usefully employ a more detailed text even if the analysis may appear to be 'legalistically' written. The questions asked by consumers in practice tend to involve the application of precise detail, and a too over-simplified text can do more harm than good in this situation.

In order to assist law and professional students wishing to study a particular subject in greater depth I have appended bibliographies and numerous footnote references to sources, particularly periodical sources, of further information.

I have received invaluable help and encouragement from many quarters – so much so that it is invidious to select names. However, I would like particularly to acknowledge the generosity of Professor C. John Miller, co-author of *Miller and Lovell on Product Liability*, for

permission to make a number of references to this invaluable book, and Professor R. J. Layton of the University of New South Wales for permission to reproduce certain material in Chapter 1. I am also most grateful to Lord Coleraine for permission to reproduce the passages quoted in Chapter 1 taken from *For Conservatives Only* (London, 1970) and reproduced in *How Conservatives Think* (ed. Buck, 1975) in the former of which Lord Coleraine explains that the ideas which he propounds here were the result of discussions with Mrs. Diana Spearman. All writers and practitioners in this field must also acknowledge their debt to the late Mr. John A. O'Keefe, OBE, whose encyclopaedias on Trade Descriptions, Weights and Measures (with which I am now privileged to be associated as co-ordinating editor) in particular have been invaluable to me in writing the appropriate parts of this book. I have also received great assistance and co-operation with bibliographies from Gordon Borrie, Director General of Fair Trading and his Office, Richard Thomas of the National Consumer Council and a number of practising trading standards officers and academic colleagues who are really too numerous to name. To them, to my secretary Miss G. Jones and to the production staff of Messrs. Butterworths I remain most grateful and it is necessary only to add that the responsibility for mistakes, inadequacies and the views expressed remains mine alone.

I have endeavoured to state the law as at 1 November 1981, but some later developments have been incorporated in the text or in the Postscript.

BRIAN W. HARVEY  
1 November 1981

## Table of Statutes and Other Legislation

References in this Table to "Statutes" are to Halsbury's Statutes of England (Third Edition) showing the volume and page at which the annotated text of the Act will be found.

PAGE		PAGE	
Administration of Justice Act 1973	183	Bills of Sale Act (1878) Amendment Act 1882 (3 <i>Statutes</i> 261)	230
Administration of Justice Act 1977 (47 <i>Statutes</i> 113, 122, 1167, 1180) . . . . .	179, 183	Bread Act 1836 . . . . .	6
s 1 . . . . .	168	Building Societies Act 1962 (3 <i>Statutes</i> 312)	
24 . . . . .	3	s 25 . . . . .	171
Sch 1 . . . . .	168	Cancer Act 1939 (21 <i>Statutes</i> 584)	222
Sch 4 . . . . .	4	Carriage by Air Act 1961 (2 <i>Statutes</i> 604) . . . . .	148
Adulteration of Food or Drink Act 1860 . . . . .	348	Cheques Act 1957 (3 <i>Statutes</i> 238)	163
Agriculture Act 1970 (40 <i>Statutes</i> 30) . . . . .	317	Civil Evidence Act 1968 (12 <i>Stat-</i> <i>utes</i> 910) . . . . .	214
s 25 . . . . .	208, 350, 351	s 11 . . . . .	198
Air Travel Reserve Fund Act 1975 (45 <i>Statutes</i> 39) . . . . .	224	Civil Liability (Contribution) Act 1978 (48 <i>Statutes</i> 357) . . . . .	149
Alcoholic Liquor Duties Act 1979 (49 <i>Statutes</i> 675) . . . . .	358	s 2 (1) . . . . .	138
Arbitration Act 1950 (2 <i>Statutes</i> 433) . . . . .	182	Coal Industry Nationalisation Act 1946 (22 <i>Statutes</i> 143)	
Arbitration Act 1979 (49 <i>Statutes</i> 58) . . . . .	182	s 1 (1) . . . . .	64
Assize of Bread and Ale (1266) . .	348	4 . . . . .	67
Auctions (Bidding Agreements) Act 1927 (2 <i>Statutes</i> 501) . . . .	203, 205	Coinage Act 1971 (41 <i>Statutes</i> 225)	367
Auctions (Bidding Agreements) Act 1969 (40 <i>Statutes</i> 192) . . . .	203, 205	Combines Investigation Act 1960 (Canada) . . . . .	29, 30, 329
Bills of Exchange Act 1882 (3 <i>Statutes</i> 188) . . . . .	163	s 33C . . . . .	329
Bills of Sale Act 1878 (3 <i>Statutes</i> 245) . . . . .	230	Competition Act 1980 (50 (2) <i>Statutes</i> 2555) . . . . .	20, 27, 288, 302
		s 2 . . . . .	303
		3 (1), (10) . . . . .	302
		4 . . . . .	303

xiv TABLE OF STATUTES

	PAGE		PAGE
Competition Act 1980— <i>contd.</i>		Consumer Credit Act 1974— <i>contd.</i>	
s 5 . . . . .	303, 305	s 58 . . . . .	247, 248
6–8 . . . . .	303	60 . . . . .	246
11 . . . . .	290	61 . . . . .	247, 248, 260
Congenital Disabilities (Civil Liability) Act 1976 (46 Statutes 1837) . . . . .		(2) . . . . .	247
Consumer Council Ordinance 1977 (Hong Kong) . . . . .		62 . . . . .	247, 260
Consumer Credit Act 1974 (44 Statutes 746) . . . . .		63 . . . . .	247, 260
s 6 . . . . .	241	(2) . . . . .	248
8 . . . . .	233	64 . . . . .	247, 260
(1) . . . . .	231	(1) . . . . .	248
(2) . . . . .	231, 235	65 . . . . .	246, 247, 260
9 (1) . . . . .	231	(1) . . . . .	255
(3) . . . . .	235	66 . . . . .	260
10 . . . . .	233	67 . . . . .	245, 247, 248, 260
(1), (2) . . . . .	235	69 . . . . .	248, 260
11 . . . . .	233, 236	71, 72 . . . . .	248, 260
(1) . . . . .	235	73 . . . . .	260
12, 13 . . . . .	233	74 . . . . .	238, 246
14 . . . . .	233	75 . . . . .	249, 260
(1) (2) . . . . .	237	76 . . . . .	250, 253, 255, 260
15 . . . . .	232	77, 78 . . . . .	238, 250, 260
16 . . . . .	232, 233	79 . . . . .	238, 260
(2), (5) . . . . .	234	80 . . . . .	250, 260
17 . . . . .	233, 238	81 . . . . .	250, 260
18 . . . . .	233	82 . . . . .	251
19 . . . . .	233, 239	84 . . . . .	237, 260
20 . . . . .	240	85 . . . . .	238, 260
(1) . . . . .	170	86 . . . . .	200
21 . . . . .	229, 240	87–89 . . . . .	253, 260
22, 23 . . . . .	241	90 . . . . .	253, 260
25 . . . . .	242	(2) . . . . .	253
35 . . . . .	242	(5) . . . . .	254
(3) . . . . .	242	91 . . . . .	253, 260
39 . . . . .	242	92 . . . . .	253, 260
(1), (2) . . . . .	242	(2) . . . . .	252
40, 41 . . . . .	242	(3) . . . . .	254
43 . . . . .	231, 243	94, 95, 97 . . . . .	251, 260
(3) . . . . .	243	98 . . . . .	252, 255, 260
44 . . . . .	243	99 . . . . .	252, 260
45–47 . . . . .	243	(3)–(5) . . . . .	252
48 . . . . .	244, 245	100 . . . . .	252, 260
49 . . . . .	236, 244, 245	101 . . . . .	251, 260
(3) . . . . .	243	(2) . . . . .	251
50 . . . . .	244, 245	102–105 . . . . .	260
51 . . . . .	237, 244, 245	107–109 . . . . .	260
55 . . . . .	246	110 . . . . .	238, 260
56 . . . . .	246, 249	111 . . . . .	260
(2)–(4) . . . . .	246	127 . . . . .	255
		129 . . . . .	255
		(2) . . . . .	255
		130 (1), (2) . . . . .	255
		131, 132 . . . . .	255

TABLE OF STATUTES XV

	PAGE		PAGE
<b>Consumer Credit Act 1974—<i>contd.</i></b>		<b>Consumer Safety Act 1978 (48 Statutes 1260)</b>	<b>123, 212</b>
s 133 . . . . .	256	s 1 (1), (2) . . . . .	219
(2), (3) . . . . .	256	2, 3 . . . . .	220
135 . . . . .	256	9 . . . . .	219
136 . . . . .	257	<b>Continental Shelf Act 1964 (22 Statutes 587)</b>	<b>194</b>
137 . . . . . 14, 231, 233, 257		<b>County Courts Act 1846</b>	<b>179</b>
138 . . . . . 14, 234, 257		<b>County Courts Act 1959 (7 Statutes 302)</b>	<b>177, 183</b>
(2)–(4) . . . . .	257	s 21 (1) . . . . .	179
139 . . . . . 14, 257		92 . . . . .	183
140 . . . . . 14		(3) . . . . .	184
145 . . . . . 241		<b>Courts Act 1971 (41 Statutes 285)</b>	
(8) . . . . .	258	s 16 (1) . . . . .	179
147 . . . . . 241		<b>Credit Unions Act 1979 (49 Statutes 640)</b>	<b>47</b>
148, 149 . . . . . 242		<b>Criminal Appeal Act 1968 (8 Statutes 687)</b>	
151–154 . . . . . 243		s 33 . . . . .	197
157 . . . . . 258		<b>Criminal Damage Act 1971 (41 Statutes 409)</b>	<b>209</b>
158, 159 . . . . . 259		<b>Criminal Justice Act 1967 (8 Statutes 583)</b>	
167, 168 . . . . . 244		s 9 . . . . .	195
171 . . . . . 228		<b>Criminal Justice (Scotland) Act 1980 (50 (2) Statutes 1770)</b>	<b>199</b>
(7) . . . . .	257	<b>Criminal Law Act 1977 (47 Statutes 142, 692)</b>	<b>191, 198</b>
173 (3) . . . . .	254	s 16 (4) . . . . .	192
181 (1)–(3) . . . . .	251	Sch 1, 3 . . . . .	191
184 . . . . . 239		<b>Dangerous Goods Ordinance (Hong Kong)</b>	<b>39</b>
188 . . . . . 228		s 5 (1) . . . . .	39
189 . . . . . 228, 231, 232, 233,		<b>Defamation Act 1952 (19 Statutes 34)</b>	<b>344</b>
239, 254		s 3 . . . . .	51
(1) . . . . .	238, 254	<b>Defective Premises Act 1972 (42 Statutes 1395)</b>	
(2) . . . . .	238	s 1 . . . . .	156
192 . . . . . 229, 230		(1) . . . . .	99
Sch 1 . . . . . 228, 242, 244, 259		(5) . . . . .	156
Sch 2 . . . . . 228, 237		3 . . . . .	156
Sch 3 . . . . . 229		6 (3) . . . . .	156
Sch 4 . . . . . 84, 230, 231, 262		<b>Dentists Act 1957 (21 Statutes 712)</b>	
<b>Consumer Information Act 1978 (Eire)</b>		s 34 . . . . .	297
s 8 . . . . . 29		<b>Diseases of Animals Act 1950 (2 Statutes 307)</b>	<b>202</b>
9 . . . . . 32		<b>Disposal of Uncollected Goods Act 1952 (2 Statutes 715)</b>	<b>164</b>
<b>Consumer Protection Act 1961 (30 Statutes 47)</b>	<b>123, 212, 219, 275</b>		
s 1 . . . . . 212			
(5) . . . . .	156		
2 . . . . . 212, 219, 319			
(5) . . . . .	212		
2A . . . . . 340			
3 . . . . . 107			
(1) . . . . . 213, 220			
(2A) (2B) . . . . . 213			
Schedule . . . . . 213			
<b>Consumer Protection Act 1971 (41 Statutes 1275)</b>	<b>212</b>		

xvi TABLE OF STATUTES

PAGE		PAGE	
Electricity Act 1947 (11 Statutes 931)		Fair Trading Act 1973— <i>contd.</i>	
s 1 (2) . . . . .	64	s 22 . . . . .	48, 114, 270
7 . . . . .	69	(4) . . . . .	270
Electricity Act 1957 (11 Statutes 1015)		23 . . . . .	114, 270
s 5 . . . . .	69	25 . . . . .	270
7 (9) . . . . .	70	(1) . . . . .	244
Sch 1 . . . . .	19	26 . . . . .	270
Estate Agents Act 1979 (49 Statutes 2)		28–30 . . . . .	271
s 3 . . . . .	172	34 . . . . .	268, 273
II . . . . .	173	(2), (3) . . . . .	273
12–21 . . . . .	172	35 . . . . .	275, 276
22 (1) . . . . .	172	36–40 . . . . .	276
25 . . . . .	268	41 . . . . .	275, 276
Sch 1 . . . . .	173	42, 43 . . . . .	276
European Communities Act 1972 (42 Statutes 24, 78)		44–46, 48, 49 . . . . .	291
s 2 . . . . .	60	50 . . . . .	290
Sch 4 . . . . .	317	51 . . . . .	291
Explosives Act 1875 (13 Statutes 155)		54, 55 . . . . .	292
s 30–32, 80 . . . . .	221	63 . . . . .	294
Explosives Act 1923 (13 Statutes 231)		64 . . . . .	294
Explosives (Age of Purchase &c.) Act 1976 (46 Statutes 594)		(5) . . . . .	294
		65–71 . . . . .	294
		73 . . . . .	293
		76 . . . . .	294
		81–83 . . . . .	270
		84 . . . . .	292, 303
		85 . . . . .	303
		88, 91, 93 . . . . .	293
		120 (2) . . . . .	265
		124 . . . . .	275
		(3) . . . . .	276
		130 . . . . .	271
		133 . . . . .	268, 275
		134 . . . . .	293
		137 (2) . . . . .	270
		Sch 4 . . . . .	297
		Sch 8, Pt I, II . . . . .	292
Fabrics (Misdescription) Act 1913 (30 Statutes 44)		Farm and Garden Chemicals Act 1967 (1 Statutes 577) . . . . .	222
s 1 . . . . .	207	Fatal Accidents Act 1846 (23 Statutes 780) . . . . .	133
3, 5 . . . . .	208	Fatal Accidents Act 1959 (23 Statutes 801) . . . . .	133
Factors Act 1889 (1 Statutes 94)		Federal Trade Commission Act (USA) . . . . .	
s 8 . . . . .	85	s 5 . . . . .	29
9 . . . . .	85, 260	Finance Act 1972 (42 Statutes 159)	
Fair Trading Act 1973 (43 Statutes 1618)	20, 27, 31, 32, 34, 70, 264, 298	s 2 . . . . .	314
s 2 . . . . .	266, 267	10 (2) . . . . .	328
3 . . . . .	47	45 (1) . . . . .	314
4 . . . . .	287, 289	Fireworks Act 1951 (13 Statutes 232) . . . . .	221
5 . . . . .	290		
6, 7 . . . . .	286, 290		
8, 11 . . . . .	290		
13 . . . . .	266, 269		
14 . . . . .	48, 269		
15, 16 . . . . .	269		
17 . . . . .	48, 269, 270		
21 . . . . .	48		

## TABLE OF STATUTES xvii

	PAGE		PAGE
Food and Drugs Act 1955 (14 Statutes 15)	39, 43, 44, 346	Hallmarking Act 1973 (43 Statutes 1768)	210
s 1 . . . . .	352	s 1 . . . . .	212
(5) . . . . .	353	2 (1) . . . . .	211
2 . . . . .	44, 315, 346, 353, 354, 355, 356, 357, 358, 361, 363	5, 6, 9 . . . . .	212
(1) . . . . .	358, 360	Sch 1, Pt II . . . . .	211, 212
3 (1) . . . . .	355, 358	Sch 2 . . . . .	211
(3) . . . . .	358, 360		
(4) . . . . .	358		
4 . . . . .	349, 360		
6 . . . . .	346, 360		
7 . . . . .	360		
8 . . . . .	214, 356, 361, 362		
(1) . . . . .	362, 363		
9, 11 . . . . .	349		
13, 14 . . . . .	351		
16 . . . . .	352		
31 . . . . .	348		
32 . . . . .	346, 348		
82 . . . . .	349		
85-87 . . . . .	347		
91, 92 . . . . .	349		
106 . . . . .	353		
109 (3) . . . . .	347		
110 . . . . .	349		
111 . . . . .	353, 362		
113 . . . . .	336, 356		
(1), (2) . . . . .	364		
(3) . . . . .	340, 364		
115 . . . . .	364		
(1), (3)-(5) . . . . .	365		
116 . . . . .	365		
123 . . . . .	361		
135 . . . . .	353		
Food and Drugs (Amendment) Act 1981	352		
Food and Drugs (Control of Food Premises) Act 1976 (46 Statutes 616)	202		
s 1 . . . . .	351		
Forfeiture Act 1870 (8 Statutes 179)			
s 4 . . . . .	197		
Freedom of Information Act 1966 (USA)	51	Judicature (Northern Ireland) Act 1978 (48 Statutes 1015)	128
s 62 . . . . .	128		
Gas Act 1948 (14 Statutes 820)	68		
s 1 (1) . . . . .	65		
Gas Act 1972 (42 Statutes 466)	68		
s 9 . . . . .	68		
10 (1) . . . . .	69		
11 . . . . .	69		
		Law of Property Act 1969 (27 Statutes 727)	115
		s 24 . . . . .	115

PAGE	PAGE		
Law on Orientation of Trade and Crafts 1973 (France) . . . . .	29	Magistrates' Courts Act 1980— <i>contd.</i>	
Law on Trade Practices 1971 (Belgium) . . . . .	30	s 31 (1) . . . . .	193
Law Reform (Married Women and Tortfeasors) Act 1935 . . . . .	134	32 . . . . .	193, 196
Law Reform (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1934 . . . . .	133	(9) . . . . .	193
Legal Aid Act 1974 (44 Statutes 1935) . . . . .	187, 188	38 . . . . .	192, 196
s 7 (5) . . . . .	188	40 . . . . .	198, 344
Limitation Act 1980 (50 (1) Statutes 1253)		76 . . . . .	198
s 4 . . . . .	225	127 . . . . .	195, 213, 311
5 . . . . .	122	(1) . . . . .	316
II . . . . .	122	133 . . . . .	193
Litigants in Person (Costs and Expenses) (45 Statutes 1639) Act 1975 . . . . .	52, 185	143 . . . . .	193, 199
Local Government Act 1972 (42 Statutes 841)		Sch 1 . . . . .	191
s 137, 142 . . . . .	45	Magna Carta (1215) . . . . .	6, 190
198 . . . . .	44, 347	Marketing Act 1975 (Sweden) . . . . .	28, 30
199 . . . . .	44, 347	Medical Act 1956 (21 Statutes 624)	
(8) . . . . .	44, 346	s 31 . . . . .	297
201 . . . . .	367	Medicines Act 1968 (21 Statutes 981)	
(2) . . . . .	312	s . . . . .	222, 361
(8) . . . . .	45	s 58, 63 . . . . .	222
222 . . . . .	312	64 . . . . .	222, 353
223 . . . . .	191, 312	85 . . . . .	363
Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (43 Statutes 677) . . . . .	45	121, 122 . . . . .	364
s 149 . . . . .	367	132, 136 . . . . .	346
Magistrates' Courts Act 1980 (50 (2) Statutes 1433)		Merchandise Marks Act 1887 . . . . .	309
s 1 . . . . .	196	s 3 . . . . .	309, 316
(2) . . . . .	194	5 . . . . .	315
2 (1), (2) . . . . .	194	Merchandise Marks Act 1953 . . . . .	309
(3), (4) . . . . .	195	Merchant Shipping Act 1894 (31 Statutes 57)	
(6) . . . . .	194	s 686 . . . . .	194
17 . . . . .	192	Misrepresentation Act 1967 (22 Statutes 675)	
18 . . . . .	192, 343	s . . . . .	79, 117
19 . . . . .	192	s 2 (1)–(3) . . . . .	104
20 . . . . .	192	3 . . . . .	114, 115
(3) . . . . .	193	Misrepresentation Act (Northern Ireland) 1967	
21, 22 . . . . .	192	s 8 . . . . .	115
23 . . . . .	192, 193	Misrepresentation Ordinance (Hong Kong) . . . . .	39
24 . . . . .	192	Mock Auctions Act 1961 (2 Statutes 503)	
25 . . . . .	192, 193	s 1 . . . . .	203
26–28 . . . . .	192	3 . . . . .	204

## TABLE OF STATUTES xix

PAGE	PAGE	
National Health Service Act 1946 (23 <i>Statutes</i> 9) s 42 . . . . .	166	Price Commission Act 1977 (47 <i>Statutes</i> 1472) . . . . . 143, 145, 232
National Health Service Reorganisation Act 1973 (43 <i>Statutes</i> 764) s 5 (5) . . . . .	166	Prices Act 1974 (44 <i>Statutes</i> 270, 1756) . . . . . 205, 272
Nuclear Installations Act 1965 (37 <i>Statutes</i> 430) . . . . .	148	s 2 . . . . . 205, 207
Nuclear Installations Act 1969 (37 <i>Statutes</i> 466) . . . . .	148	4 . . . . . 206, 207
Occupiers' Liability Act 1957 (23 <i>Statutes</i> 792) . . . . .	162	5 . . . . . 207
Offences against the Person Act 1861 (8 <i>Statutes</i> 147) s 9 . . . . .	194	Schedule . . . . . 207
Patents Act 1977 (47 <i>Statutes</i> 1005) s 25 . . . . .	287	Prices Act 1975 (45 <i>Statutes</i> 2217) . . . . . 205
Petroleum (Consolidation) Act 1928 (26 <i>Statutes</i> 162) . . . . .	221	s 2 . . . . . 206
Pharmacy Act 1868 . . . . .	348	Public Health and Urban Services Ordinance (Hong Kong) . . . . . 39
Pharmacy and Poisons Act 1933 (21 <i>Statutes</i> 860) . . . . .	222	Pyramid Selling Ordinance 1980 (Hong Kong) . . . . . 39
Pharmacy and Poisons Ordinance (Hong Kong) . . . . .	39	
Poisons Act 1972 (42 <i>Statutes</i> 1315) . . . . .	222	
Policyholders Protection Act 1975 (45 <i>Statutes</i> 784) . . . . .	223	Race Relations Act 1976 (46 <i>Statutes</i> 389) . . . . . 173
Port of London Act 1908 . . . . .	63	Railway and Canal Traffic Act 1854 . . . . . 116
Post Office Act 1953 (25 <i>Statutes</i> 413) s 3 (1) . . . . .	64	s 7 . . . . . 116
Post Office Act 1969 (25 <i>Statutes</i> 470) s 14 . . . . . (6) . . . . . (8) . . . . . (14) . . . . . 15 . . . . . (3) . . . . . 29 . . . . .	72 72 72, 73 73 73 73 66	Rehabilitation of Offenders Act 1974 (44 <i>Statutes</i> 148) . . . . . 174
Powers of Criminal Courts Act 1973 (43 <i>Statutes</i> 288) s 35 . . . . . (5) . . . . . 36, 37, 38 . . . . .	197, 198, 343 261 197	Resale Prices Act 1964 (37 <i>Statutes</i> 158) . . . . . 289
Price and Assise of Bread (1709)	2	Resale Prices Act 1976 (46 <i>Statutes</i> 2033) . . . . . 20, 27, 289, 305 s 9 . . . . . (2) . . . . . 11, 13 . . . . . 14 . . . . . 15 . . . . . 25, 26 . . . . .
		305 307 306 307 306
		Restriction of Offensive Weapons Act 1959 (8 <i>Statutes</i> 472) s 1 (1) . . . . . 319
		Restrictive Practices Court Act 1976 (46 <i>Statutes</i> 1946) . . . . . 289
		Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1956 (37 <i>Statutes</i> 77) . . . . . 289 s 1, 2, 6 . . . . . 288 24, 25 . . . . . 288
		Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1968 (37 <i>Statutes</i> 316) . . . . . 289
		Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1976 (46 <i>Statutes</i> 1955) . . . . . 20, 27, 265, 295, 304
		s 1 . . . . . (3) . . . . . 2 . . . . . (1) . . . . . 3, 4 . . . . .
		296 296 299 296 296

XX TABLE OF STATUTES

PAGE	PAGE
Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1976— <i>contd.</i>	Sale of Goods Act 1979— <i>contd.</i>
s 6 . . . . . 288, 296	s 13 (1), (2) . . . . . 87 (3) . . . . . 88
7 . . . . . 296	14 . . 89, 92, 97, 101, 108, 119, 119, 132, 133, 135
8 . . . . . 307	(1) . . . . . 89 (2) . . . . . 89, 94, 96 (3) . . . . . 94, 96
9 . . . . . 296	(4), (5) . . . . . 92 (6) . . . . . 90
10 . . . . . 299	15 . . 89, 93, 108, 114, 119
11 . . . . . 296, 297	18 r 1 . . . . . 260
(2) . . . . . 297	21 (1) . . . . . 262
12 . . . . . 297	24 . . . . . 262
18 . . . . . 296	25 (1) . . . . . 260, 262 (2) . . . . . 262
19 . . . . . 300	34 . . . . . 100
21 . . . . . 299	35 . . . . . 86, 100
24 . . . . . 301	53 . . . . . 100
35, 36 . . . . . 302	(1) . . . . . 107
40 . . . . . 299	(2) . . . . . 135
Sch 1 . . . . . 297	(3) . . . . . 101
Sch 2 . . . . . 301	54 . . . . . 100
Restrictive Trade Practices Act 1977 (47 Statutes 1467) . . . . . 289, 296	55 (1) . . . . . 107
Schedule . . . . . 296	61 (1) . . . . . 83, 89
Road Traffic Act 1972 (42 Statutes 1633)	Sale of Goods Ordinance (Hong Kong) . . . . . 39
s 33, 60 . . . . . 223	Sex Discrimination Act 1975 (18 Statutes 68) . . . . . 173
63 . . . . . 223	Sherman Act 1890 (U.S.A) . . . . . 26
Sch 1 . . . . . 223	Slaughter of Poultry Act 1967 (14 Statutes 181) . . . . . 349
Sale of Food and Drugs Act 1875 . . . . . 348	Slaughterhouses Act 1974 (44 Stat- utes 230) . . . . . 349
s 2, 6 . . . . . 355	s 3, 12, 34, 36, 39 . . . . . 349
Sale of Goods Act 1893 (30 Statutes 6) . . . . . 84	Solicitors Act 1974 (44 Statutes 1478)
s 12 . . . . . 105, 318	s 20-23 . . . . . 298
13 . . . . . 105, 114	31, 37 . . . . . 167
14 . . . . . 105, 114	47, 49 . . . . . 168
(1) . . . . . 94, 95	Statute of Monopolies (1623) (24 Statutes 543)
(2) . . . . . 87, 94	s 1, 2 . . . . . 287
15 . . . . . 105, 114	Statutory Corporations (Financial Provisions) Act 1975 (45 Statutes 1041)
29 . . . . . 108	Supply of Goods (Implied Terms) Act 1973 (43 Statutes 1337) . . . . . 84, 94, 107, 230
53 (2) . . . . . 102	s 3 . . . . . 88
55 . . . . . 107	8 . . . . . 108
Sale of Goods Act 1979 (49 Statutes 1102) . . . . . 48, 84, 120	9-11 . . . . . 108
s 2 . . . . . 117, 162	16 . . . . . 85
3 . . . . . 162	
11 . . . . . 162	
(3) . . . . . 99	
(4) . . . . . 86	
12 . . . . . 85, 108, 119	
(1)-(3) . . . . . 86	
13 . . . . . 88, 101, 108, 112, 114, 119	

## TABLE OF STATUTES XXI

	PAGE	PAGE
Territorial Waters Jurisdiction Act 1878 (8 Statutes 214)	194	Trade Descriptions Act 1968—contd.
Theft Act 1968 (8 Statutes 782)	224	s 21 . . . . . 194
s 4 . . . . . 161		23 . . . . . 311, 324, 326, 336, 337, 15 . . . . . 224, 313, 342 341, 342
22 . . . . . 224		24 . . . . . 311, 322, 336, 341, 384
28 (1), (3) . . . . . 86 (1) . . . . . 244, 337, 338, 340, 341		(2) . . . . . 337
31 . . . . . 225 (3) . . . . . 337, 340		25 . . . . . 311, 336
Theft Act 1978 (48 Statutes 311)	225	27, 28 . . . . . 312
Tokyo Convention Act 1967 (2 Statutes 702)		29 . . . . . 311, 312
s 1 . . . . . 194		39 (1) . . . . . 319, 320
Torts (Interference with Goods)		(2) . . . . . 320
Act 1977 (47 Statutes 67)	86, 164	40 . . . . . 310
s 12 . . . . . 165		Trade Descriptions Act 1972 (42 Statutes 2249)
Sch I, Pt I . . . . . 165		s 1 (5) . . . . . 310
Pt II . . . . . 165		4 (2) . . . . . 345
Trade Descriptions Act 1968 (37 Statutes 948)	172, 192, 193, 194, 196, 197, 223, 242, 320	Trade Descriptions Ordinance 1980 (Hong Kong) . . . . . 311
s 1 311, 322, 336, 341, 342, 381		Trade Marks Act 1905 . . . . . 382
(1) 313, 314, 316, 320, 324, 326, 336, 337, 340, 341, 343, 383		Trade Practices Act 1974 (Australia) . . . . . 32
(2) . . . . . 313		s 52 . . . . . 29
2 . . . . . 313, 316, 317, 324		60 . . . . . 31
(1) . . . . . 317, 321, 322, 324		69, 72 . . . . . 119
(2) . . . . . 315, 319		Trade Practices Act 1974 (British Columbia) . . . . . 29
(3) . . . . . 317		Trading Representations (Dis- abled Persons) Act 1958 (37 Statutes 116)
(4), (5) . . . . . 319		s 1 . . . . . 207
3 . . . . . 313		Trading Representatives (Disabled Persons) Amendment Act 1972 (42 Statutes 2203)
(3) . . . . . 316, 324		s 1 . . . . . 207
4 . . . . . 192, 313, 314, 315		Trading Stamps Act 1964 (37 Statutes 170)
(2) . . . . . 315		s 1 . . . . . 48, 85
(3) . . . . . 316, 326		s 2 . . . . . 208
5 . . . . . 313		(1) . . . . . 208
(2), (3) . . . . . 320		3, 4 . . . . . 209
6 . . . . . 213, 313, 319, 325, 328		5 . . . . . 208
9 . . . . . 342, 344		7 . . . . . 209
11 . . . . . 310, 314, 327, 329, 332, 333, 336		Transport Act 1962 (26 Statutes 925)
(2) . . . . . 329, 339		s 56 . . . . . 71
(3) . . . . . 327, 328, 330		Transport Act 1980 (50(2) Statutes 1930)
12, 13 . . . . . 319, 342		s 8 . . . . . 71
14 . . . . . 28, 285, 310, 311, 333, 334, 335, 336, 342, 343		Unfair Contract Terms Act 1977 (47 Statutes 84) . . . . . 31, 36, 98, 106, 117, 230, 284
(1) . . . . . 341		
(2), (4) . . . . . 334		
18 . . . . . 311, 343		
19 . . . . . 195, 312		
(4) . . . . . 316		
20 . . . . . 313, 339		

xxii TABLE OF STATUTES

	PAGE		PAGE
Unfair Contract Terms Act 1977— <i>contd.</i>		Weights and Measures Act 1963— <i>contd.</i>	
s 1 (3)	108, 161	s 22	378
2	119, 127, 129, 160, 161, 175	24	315, 371, 381, 382 (1) . . . . . 196, 380, 381 (2), (3) . . . . . 380, 381 (4)–(8) . . . . . 381
(2)	171, 175	25	382 (1) . . . . . 384 (4) . . . . . 382
3	110, 112, 162, 175	26	383, 388 (1) . . . . . 336, 383, 388 (2) . . . . . 384 (6), (7) . . . . . 384
4	175	27	383, 388
5	128, 129	32	380
6	108, 112, 232	33	378, 379 (1) . . . . . 379
7	105, 109, 119	41, 42, 45	368
8	114	48	368, 369
11	113, 115, 116	49	369
(1)	115	51	195, 346
12	109, 110	52	191 (2) . . . . . 196
13	149	54 (5)	389
(1)	127	58	374 (1) . . . . . 375
Sch 1	175	Sch 1, Pt IV	379
Sch 2	109	Sch 1A	369
Uniform Commercial Code (USA)		Sch 2	366
art 2–302	31	Sch 3	367, 370
2–608 (1)	101	Sch 4	372, 378 Pt I–III . . . . . 373 Pt VII–IX . . . . . 375 Pt X . . . . . 376
313 (1) (b)	87	Sch 5	372, 376, 378
Unsolicited Goods and Services		Sch 6	372, 377, 378
Act 1971 (41 Statutes 407, 1277, 2055)	30, 209	Pt I	377
s 1	209	Pt III	377
2	209	Sch 7	372, 378, 379
3–5	210	Sch 8	372, 378
Unsolicited Goods and Services		Weights and Measures Act 1979	
(Amendment) (45 Statutes 2214)		(49 Statutes 1538)	383, 386
Act 1975	209	S 1	387
Vaccine Damage Payments Act		2 (5)	387
1979 (49 Statutes 1081)	151	5	387
Weights and Measures Act 1963		19	374, 381, 388
(39 Statutes 720)	317	Weights and Measures &c. Act	
s 2	5, 366	1976 (46 Statutes 2117)	369, 389
4, 5	368	Sch 4	377
9	369	Weights and Measures (Metric	
(1)	369	System) Act 1897	5
9A	6, 369, 370	Weights and Measures Ordinance	
9B	370, 389	1885 (Hong Kong)	38
11	370, 371		
15	371		
(1)	371		
16	371, 381		
(3)	372		
17	372		
21	378, 379		

## List of Cases

611855

PAGE	PAGE		
Air India v Wiggins (1980) . . . . .	194	Beckett v Kingston Bros (Butchers) Ltd (1970) . . . . .	338
Allard v Selfridge & Co Ltd (1925) . . . . .	317	Bentick Ltd v Cromwell Engineering Co Ltd (1971) . . . . .	254
Allen v Simmons (1978) . . . . .	204	Bentley (Dick) Productions Ltd v Harold Smith Motors (1965) . . . . .	82, 83
Anderson v Britcher (1914) . . . . .	356	Bibby-Cheshire v Golden Wonder Ltd (1972) . . . . .	340, 383, 384
Andrews v Hopkinson (1957) . . . . .	84	Biggin & Co Ltd v Permanite Ltd (1951) . . . . .	102
Andrews Bros (Bournemouth) Ltd v Singer & Co Ltd (1934) . . . . .	105	Birkenhead and District Co-operative Society Ltd v Roberts (1970) . . . . .	339
Anglo-Continental Holidays Ltd v Typaldos (London) Ltd (1967) . . . . .	111	Bishopsgate Motor Finance Corp v Transport Brakes Ltd (1949) . . . . .	85
Anness v Grivell (1915) . . . . .	357	Board v Thomas Hedley & Co Ltd (1951) . . . . .	126
Anns v Merton London Borough (1978) . . . . .	124, 169, 170	Bolam v Friern Hospital Management Committee (1957) . . . . .	155
Arcos Ltd v E. A. Ronaason & Son (1933) . . . . .	88	Bollinger (J.) v Costa Brava Wine Co Ltd (1960) . . . . .	318
Ashby v Tolhurst (1937) . . . . .	160	Boots Cash Chemists (Southern) Ltd v Cowling (1903) . . . . .	356
Ashington Piggeries v Christopher Hill Ltd (1972) . . . . .	96, 97	Brander v Kinnear (1923) . . . . .	355
Askew v Intasun North Ltd (1980) . . . . .	111, 158	Breed v Cluett (1970) . . . . .	335
Astley Industrial Trust Ltd v Grimley (1963) . . . . .	118	British Airways Board v Taylor (1975) . . . . .	335
 B G Transport Services v Marston Motor Co (1970) . . . . .	160	British Fermentation Products Ltd v British Trading Co Ltd (1942) . . . . .	364
Bagot v Stevens Scanlan & Co Ltd (1966) . . . . .	155	British Gas Corp v Lubbock (1974) . . . . .	317
Baldry v Marshall (1925) . . . . .	95	Brougham v Whittaker (1944) . . . . .	355
Barker v Hargreaves (1981) . . . . .	337	Brown (B S) & Son Ltd v Craiks Ltd (1970) . . . . .	92
Bartlett v Sidney Marcus Ltd (1965) . . . . .	91	Brunner v Williams (1975) . . . . .	368
Bastin v Davies (1950) . . . . .	355	Buchanan-Jardine v Hamlink and Anor (1981) . . . . .	90
Batty v Metropolitan Property Realisations Ltd (1978) . . . . .	155, 156		
Beale v Taylor (1967) . . . . .	82, 83, 88		
Bebee v Sales (1916) . . . . .	122		
Beckett v Cohen (1973) . . . . .	335, 336		