**The Geography of Things**

# Aims

* To explore Keswick’s consumer economy
* To encourage critical engagement with the things that we buy

# Introduction

Every ‘thing’ tells a story. The physical environment of rocks and fossils teaches us about past environments and human settlements. At the same time, the human world of manufactured things can teach us about our contemporary society.

Britain is a consumer society; consumption is a key driver of economic growth in service economies such as ours. But shopping is not a neutral activity. We don’t just buy things to satisfy a narrow utility. What we buy says as much about our identity, values and desires as it does about what we actually *need*. In the same way, the kind of things you can buy in one town will differ from another town, based on the economy of the area.

This exercise is about *the geography of things*. Using Keswick as our field site, we will explore the town’s local consumer economy by observing and engaging critically with the things that are sold there.

# Exercise

In groups of 3-4, go out and explore Keswick, visiting the shops and anywhere else you can buy things. There are two parts to this exercise:

*1. Observe*

As you wander around the town, get a feel for Keswick’s consumer economy. Think about:

* The *types* of shops in Keswick
* Whether you would describe Keswick as a *typical* British shopping town
* The type of things for sale

*2. Engage*

Time to do some detective work! Choose any 3 things that take your fancy. Make a note of them, take a photo of them with your phone, and then spend some time in your groups critically engaging with those things. Think about:

* *What* attracted you to it in the first place? (Why have you chosen it?)
* *Where* was the product made? (Can you find this out? Do you think it was made in one or in several different places?)
* *How* was product was made (Was it handmade? Mass produced?)
* *What* does the thing do? Does it have more than one function?
* In your opinion, does it satisfy a genuine need, or merely a desire? (If so, what?)
* Does the product raise any moral questions? Is it a *good* or a *bad* product, and why?

# Discussion

After exploring Keswick, we’ll reconvene for a chat about what you found. We’ll start by discussing what you observed about the town’s consumer economy, followed by a ‘show and tell’ about the three things your group chose. *What stories do these things tell us?*