

Use it or lose it - we can ensure that town trade flourishes



by **John Steele**
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A LETTER from an independent retailer in last week's edition bemoaned the lack of variety in our shops and the large number of hairdressers, opticians and restaurants.

I am sure this resonated with many who remember the Horsham of earlier years but I am not convinced that the situation is as bad as suggested, or that the old days were as good as we

think we remember.

Yes, there are certainly fewer independent stores but there are some notable family businesses that continue to thrive by providing high standards of service and something a little different.

It would be good to have more and, whilst there is little doubt that the high cost of rent and business rates act as a disincentive, it is encouraging to see newcomers are starting up in the town.

Shopping and economic patterns have always changed, and the high street has adapted accordingly. Not so long ago every one had a coal merchant, a

fishmonger, greengrocer and several butchers.

We paid our utility bills at the gas and electric showrooms. We rented our televisions from the high street store; and our only phone was at home, firmly attached to a wall.

We took photographs on reels and waited until we had completed a reel before taking it to a high street shop for processing.

We cannot turn the clock back. Technology has changed the way in which we live our lives. Some industries and shops have disappeared but others have been created.

We are collectively to blame for the success of

the supermarket; we are no longer content to eat what is in season and price often wins over quality. We want to shop whenever we get the urge, not just between 9 -5. And who would go back to half-day closing?

The internet is claiming more and more of our spending, not just because of competitive prices but convenience and speed of delivery. Our leisure habits have changed too. We are eating out more often and with more variety. We are becoming a café society.

Like it or not, the high street of the future will be made up of branches of national chains, niche independent stores, and

providers of personal services and experiences which cannot be bought over the internet.

Choice will be found in competition between providers and the market will determine which survive and which fail. Unless we want to see even more empty shops we should welcome the restaurants, cafés, nail bars and hairdressers.

If people use them they will flourish, if not they will disappear. Most importantly, they bring people into the town and provide opportunities for other traders.

Oh, and I nearly forgot the charity shops. Once tatty and

unprofessional, these are now an integral part of our shopping experience creating income for good causes and recycling goods that would otherwise be discarded.

There is still a lot of choice in our town – including independent retailers - so remember that old maxim – use it or lose it.

The Horsham Society is concerned about the past, present and future of the town. It seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. Membership of the Horsham Society is open to anyone who shares these concerns. For more information, visit our website www.horshamsociety.org.