

East Street is the town's future and must be made to work

COMPLAINTS from East Street traders in last week's County Times highlight the issues that towns like Horsham must face up to as traditional high streets respond to the challenges of the 21st century.

Our shopping habits are changing. When it comes to buying big ticket items customer loyalty has all but disappeared.

Often we use local shops as convenient showrooms in which to examine potential purchases and then go home to order them from the internet. Shops that cannot match internet prices and speed of delivery are simply uncompetitive and will probably not survive.

The exceptions may be



by **John Steele**
of the
Horsham
Society

major names which can afford to offer the same prices in store as on their internet sites and choose to maintain a high street presence as part of their overall marketing strategy.

Even for low cost goods we are becoming more price sensitive and turning to large discount retailers.

So what does this mean for Horsham? As our shopping habits change, we can expect to see this reflected in our

main shopping streets. But, as in the past, it need not mean the death of the high street provided we allow it to respond to market forces and evolve to meet the needs of today.

Increasingly high streets need to be attractive places to visit, offering experiences which cannot be provided remotely through the internet. These include personal services such as hairdressing, restaurants, local markets, and most important of all small independent traders offering well presented niche product ranges and bespoke design advice.

Many people feel that we have too many restaurants and coffee shops but had they

not filled the vacuum created by store closures what would our shopping streets look like today? There is nothing more depressing, and likely to deter shoppers, than boarded up shop fronts.

More importantly, the restaurants, coffee shops, and hairdressers attract shoppers into the town, create a lively atmosphere and boost trade in other stores.

In the end, the market will decide the fate of the high street. If shoppers like what they see they will come to Horsham; if not they will go elsewhere.

Which brings me back to East Street. For all the moaning who would want to turn the clock back? Before the improvements it was an

unattractive, unwelcoming street through which one passed through as quickly as possible. Now it is much better, and would be better still with a few changes.

Ideally, it should be fully pedestrianised from mid morning until late afternoon. This would allow the planned alfresco dining without traffic fumes and danger. We believe this is now the overwhelming view of shoppers.

Until this can be realised an immediate ban on large vehicles and proper enforcement of the remaining restrictions would remove many concerns. Why can't our parking attendants and PCSOs work together on this?

Schemes like East Street,

with an exciting mix of restaurants and small traders, and an attractive environment which encourages visitors, are what we need to breathe life into our town centre and avoid the decline which will otherwise occur. So, let's sort out the teething difficulties and make it an unqualified success.

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 or telephone 01403 263870.