



The Pub Bore

Let Me Tell You a Thing or Two About the High Street

25/3/20

Of course, the thing everybody always forgets about the demise of Woolworths is that it was a bloody awful business model in the first place. Completely unsustainable. Any director of marketing – or your advertising execs, for that matter, even the bad ones – they know that brand security is about having a focused image of yourself, because that amounts to an identity for the business, right? If you're all over the place, you know, trying to do a bit of everything, that's tantamount to never having existed in the first place. They all know that. Ask anybody in the know and they'll tell you. What sort of shop are you? Oh, you know, the sort that sells records and sweets and light bulbs. I mean, Christ, it was a good job old Woolworth started with his own money, because no investor, or any one worth their salt at least, is going to give you a second look if that's what you're putting on the table. It's like these people who want to be famous. They don't care what for, just famous. And they'll do absolutely any bloody silly bastard thing if they think it'll get them noticed. And in the end they're famous for five minutes for being a desperate, talentless fame chaser, then they disappear down the plughole because no one's got any clue who they were. And notice that it didn't take the advent of the out-of-town shopping centre to sink Woolworths either. They were long gone by then. Long gone. Alright, there might have been a couple of them still around, but they were a shell by then. A shell of their former selves. Ask anyone in the know and they'll tell you the same thing I'm telling you now: they were long gone, completely spent as a shopping experience, because they shot themselves in the foot, you see? But even if they had survived for a bit longer – not as shells of their former selves, clinging on, but like they were to start with – do you think they'd have lasted once Bluewater started up? Of course they wouldn't have. Do me a favour. Not a chance. Not. A. Chance. And d'you know why? Because with a shopping centre – your Bluewaters, your Pentagon Centres, your Lakesides – with a shopping centre, the whole bloody building is like a giant Woolworths, except it actually *does* have a bit of everything. I mean, this is what everybody always forgets when they're talking about the demise of the high street: it was a bloody awful limited setup in the first place. There just wasn't any way of noticing that yet. Then the minute your shopping centres come along, your Lakesides, your Bluewaters, out on the edge of town, or between towns, with all that parking, and how neat, how well set up it all is, everything there so you've not got to fuck about with anything, no driving round and round to see if you can park, or if you're allowed to use the library car park or whatever. And you know that once you have parked, you'll be able to get what you want in there, and have a cup of tea or a bit of something to eat if

you need to, or you can be in and out, or you can have a sit down while they go round, or whatever. The minute that all comes along, it's immediately bloody obvious what a ball-ache the highstreet has been all this time and yet no one'll say it. No one will say anything because they're all brainwashed by nostalgia. And that's why nostalgia is killing this country. Take your Woolworths. When you were in there, you got a bit of this and that, but you only went there when you didn't know where else to go, on the off-chance. Now, anyone in the know will tell you what I'm telling you now: there's no longevity in that business model. None. You know why? Because it doesn't allow for progress in its own sector, right? Back then, when Woolworths looked like it might be doing alright, you didn't have future proofing. No one had thought of it yet. But it was coming. So you've got to ask yourself, how did anyone else do future proofing before future proofing was a thing? How did anyone else do it? They did it by knowing what they were, and by trying to be as much of that as possible, but also by being ready for when anything changed. And don't try to tell me that things got left behind by not being flexible enough, by not understanding how to change themselves. Of course you're going to come unstuck sometimes when people stop wanting handmade gates that take a month and a half to come. But people don't stop *needing* gates, and they still know where to go, even if it is somewhere else. But when your shop is just a place to go when you don't know where else would have a thing, whatever it is, and then nine times out of ten you don't have it either, people are going to get tired of it. And no one says that. They'll say Woolworths was their favourite shop in the high street. But that's nostalgia. And that's the danger of nostalgia, because it was exciting when you were a kid and you've got no attention span, you know, seeing a lot of old tat in one place, and you can have some sweets while you're at it. But I promise you, speak to anyone in branding or marketing – high up people – and they'll tell you what I'm telling you now: that wasn't a proper business model then any more than it is now, and nostalgia isn't going to save you from that. Nostalgia isn't going to save you from anything. Unless you need saving from reality, and there's a name for people like that, if you know what I mean. And when the out-of-town shopping centres do open up, well – boom! There it all is, and you can't disguise that. If we'd had them twenty or thirty years before, they'd have taken over then like they have now, nostalgia or no nostalgia. And of course, it doesn't hurt that they had the oomph to get the rules bent a bit for them. Didn't hurt one bit. And I don't mean they did anything illegal, but it also doesn't mean what they did was fair. Do you understand? I mean, you can't tell me, right, you can't tell me that when they shut off East street, when they shut it off for repairs to the tarmac or digging up for the water or whatever it was, you can't tell me that was a coincidence. All that coming up or being laid down or whatever – that the timing of all that was by accident. Because the whole setup had been jiggered for years and they'd done nothing, absolutely nothing, and then a shopping centre opens up outside the town, and lo and behold they urgently have to do the works. And why is that? Why is it that despite East Street having been well in need of a bit of care and attention for all those poor bloody businesses for all that bloody time that nothing happened? That the whole street was allowed to fall into bits? I'll tell you why: because the council had it in for East Street from the beginning. No doubt about it. You ask anyone in the know and they'll tell you what I'm telling you now. Those poor bloody shops trying do business off the main drag

when the council wanted them out. I know you could still walk down there when the works were on, but it wasn't pleasant, was it? It was noisy and dusty and that tiny little road was right on top of the doors of all those shops. All those shops that barely did any business at the best of times for being off the main drag, and then they got super-duper bloody all-singing, all-dancing shopping centres opening just outside the town. And the drive didn't put anyone off because you couldn't park in the high street anyway, because the council had seen to that too. And I'll tell you this: there isn't any way, no way, that that council didn't know about the out-of-town shopping centres years in advance, long before anyone else. I mean, it only makes sense doesn't it? That they, the council, would know all about what's in the pipeline in the area for months and years before anyone else, receiving planning applications and survey requests and approaches for informal consultations. In other words, snidey information, off the record and all that. It only makes sense. Makes no sense that they'd be in the dark. And knowing all that, can you imagine them not getting a bit involved? Getting a little bit more involved than they ought to? With the prospect of a bit of business coming their way? Do me a favour. They'd have been all over that like shit on a blanket, wouldn't they? Wouldn't they though? Course they would. And do you know what? I wouldn't put it past them, knowing what sneaky bastards they've been with other parts of town: giving out parking tickets like confetti, and letting one butcher have the monopoly while there's five fucking shoe shops. Knowing all that, I wouldn't put it past them to be in the pay of those shopping centre companies from the beginning. From before a brick was laid, agreeing to make it difficult for the high street when opening time came. And how do I know that? Because local councils are basically legalised protection rackets. And don't you let anyone tell you any different. They're legalised protection rackets. All you've got to do is look at how they operate and it's plain to see. I mean, think about it. Now, every one of those council departments has its own remit. Every one of them. And there's about two dozen of them. They all want their own thing, but they've got one thing in common, and do you know what that is? They've got one thing in common, and it is that they all think they're the bloody bees knees and no one could do without them. So when some big, fancy company sidles up and pays them a bit of attention, doesn't matter what department it is, they all start cooing like turtle doves and sucking up and looking for a bit more attention and a bit more prestige, and they'll do whatever's asked of them to get it as long as it doesn't cost them anything, and who knows it might make them a bit into the bargain. I remember when those high-street shops were opened by the mayor and the lady mayoress, with a ribbon cutting and speeches about the town's bright new future, how it's growing and getting more vibrant and all this bollocks. And do you know what else they said? Right there, on the day these places were opened, in front of everybody? What they said it was going to be? They said it was going to be a new beginning for East Street. Piss off. Can you believe it? The gall, saying that, with everyone there and all the bells and whistles and ceremonies. To say *that*, when anyone who'd been paying attention could tell it was a win-win for the council. And anyone who knows anything about how these local business networks are run would tell you what I'm telling you now. East Street was doomed from the beginning, and it didn't matter what anyone said. If the shops are a success, the council takes the credit; if they're a failure, the council turns everything into flats with no opposition because

we've all seen that you can't put anything else there. I saw it all coming of course. But they rely on you not being able to do anything about it. They've got their old boy network and fingers in the trifle, and unless you went to the right school or your uncle worked in the right department, you don't get a say in anything, not in this town, not in any town, and you'd do well to remember that. You ask anyone in the know. They'll tell you the same thing I'm telling you now. I mean, I can show some moral support, of course I can, but I don't want to shop there any more than anyone else. And that's coming from someone who's spent a lot of time and energy trying to explain these problems to people. So how do you think it was with anyone that didn't care from the off? No, East Street was doomed to fail and they knew it. Because the law of nature is that there's always a bigger fish. Not literally. I'm being metaphysical. Whatever size fish you are, there will always be a bigger one, and a bigger one after that, all chasing each other round in a circle trying to swallow the one in front. So of course, the out-of-town shopping centres look like a small fish, a minnow or a tench or something, now the internet is up and running. People forget how big a fish they seemed when they opened up. Like a tuna when they opened up they were. But, I tell you this, when your broadband goes, or your Wi-Fi or the cloud or whatever... When the internet breaks, where do you go ? Lakeside or East Street? You can't just pop to the ring road in your slippers, can you? And you want to try getting round those giant centres in half an hour. They don't seem so small then, do they? I get tired of having to explain it. They're too big for even half a day, never mind a quick pop. You go in the morning or you don't go at all. I mean, think about it: you set off at, say, twelve o'clock, eleven o'clock if you're trying to be clever. You get there an hour later, so split the difference and call it half twelve. So you're getting there at half twelve, but you haven't had anything to eat, and you're not telling me you're going straight into a big shop without eating anything. You wouldn't dream of it. So why then – and it baffles me why people always forget to think about this – why then wouldn't you allow any time to eat something once you get there? If you're getting there for half twelve, one o'clock, by the time you've decided where you're going to eat – and those food courts are big places, some of them on more than one floor, and going up and down those escalators looking at the maps'll take you a bloody half hour in itself – so by the time you've decided where you're going for food, and you've decided what you're going to have, and you've queued up for it and ordered it, and they've found your table and brought it over to you, and you've eaten it – by the time you've done all that, it's nigh on three o'clock and you haven't been in a single bloody shop yet. You could take a snack for the car or something, to be clever. Have your eats on the way, so you can get straight into the shopping once you're there. But I don't want my bloody eats in the car. And if I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times: half a day is too short, even if you have eaten. I mean, think about it for just one second. You get there at midday. Say for argument's sake you've already had something to eat, or you had a bigger breakfast or something. You get parked up, you get in there and there's four floors. Four. Floors. Every one of them bigger than your old high street. And you know that when you went shopping down that high street you wouldn't dream of getting there after twelve, because it'll take you the whole afternoon to get round everywhere. But now you're in a place that's got four of those high streets all stacked up on top of each other, and for some reason you've decided to try and get round it in an

afternoon, which amounts to doing basically a whole high street every couple of hours, and that's without any time to stop for a cup of tea or anything to eat. You'd need to be Linford bloody Christie to do it without taking a break. And how you think there's going to be time to look at things in the shops and decide what you want, I do not know. You'll be in – up and down a couple of aisles, with no time to look about or think – and out, one shop after another. Bang, bang, bang. Into the car with a couple of bags of god knows what and home again, starving hungry and no idea what you've got, half the list not in there. If you want to do a shop, you need to have a list, or allow yourself the time to look around. And if you haven't got a list or the time, just do yourself a favour and have a day off. You may as well, for what good the shopping's going to do. The last time we went to Bluewater we got there at bloody half past two. We went in, had a cup of tea, went in M&S for some bits and came home. What is the bloody point in that? And they don't even have the proper selection in M&S anymore. But don't get me started on that. Right, fancy another?

— as spoken to Matt Rogers