The Sunday Telegraph | Business

RETAIL

The high street's not dead yet – there's still a place for old-fashioned retail

Caroline Bullock visits Godalming in Surrey to see how a back-to-the-future approach has sustained its thoroughfare in the face of stiff competition

If nothing is certain but death and taxes, perhaps it explains why accountants and funeral directors remain a steady presence on our ever-changing high street.

Impervious to consumer whims and the digital onslaught, many of these firms will stay for generations as businesses around them come and go with the ebbs and flows of market forces.

It's a scenario that has played out in the market town of Godalming, Surrey. Both trades are notable survivors in a town that has undergone seismic change in the last 50 years as evidenced by the 1961 issue of *Kelly's Guildford and Godalming directory*.

This precursor to today's *Yellow Pages* offers a rare insight into a retail era long

consigned to the archives: when drapers, corset makers, typewriting bureaus and corn merchants occupied the many listed buildings; pubs and banks were in double figures, parking was free, and specialists lived above their shops.

With today's high street under ever greater scrutiny, pitched in a losing battle with online retail, does the past offer any lessons that can inform its future?

'There's a movement of shoppers wanting to deal with retailers on a smaller scale, with independents'

For lifelong Godalming resident John Young, the Sixties was a time when the one street catered for his every need.

His then 30-something self had suits made at Darkings Bros menswear, dry-cleaned at the Godalming Laundry, while the Co-op Furniture shop kitted out his first marital home. He remembers Jones Ironmongers with affection.

"All the pots and pans, and coal scuttles, which were made on the premises, would be hung on oak beams. It stocked just about everything you needed, which was why people came from far and wide [to shop there]," he says. "Another favourite was the Burgess Store – you went in with a list and they found everything for you; it couldn't be more different from the self-service tills or wandering around a supermarket. I do miss that kind of service today, when you knew all the traders by name."

Nowadays, with little need for a nail bar, Mr Young must travel further for his weekly shop.

On a bleak February afternoon, Godalming high street still looks the part, even if several of the elegant listed buildings with their bargate stone and Chippendale windows house kebab shops, coffee chains, charity shops and a Greggs bakery.

The Sixties tobacconist is now replaced with a vape shop selling electronic cigarettes, while a few empty premises signal the recent departures of Subway, Thomas Cook and Halifax bank. Yet compared to many other town centres across the country, it's a high street in reasonable shape.

Of the 204 shops, 70pc are independent, while its 5pc vacancy rate falls well below the 14pc average, according to figures from the British Independent Retailers Association (BIRA).

Alongside the familiar roll call of brand names, there is still a butcher, a grocer, even a couple of tailors, while a flurry of new barbers reflects one of the UK's biggest growth areas in the independent trade sector.

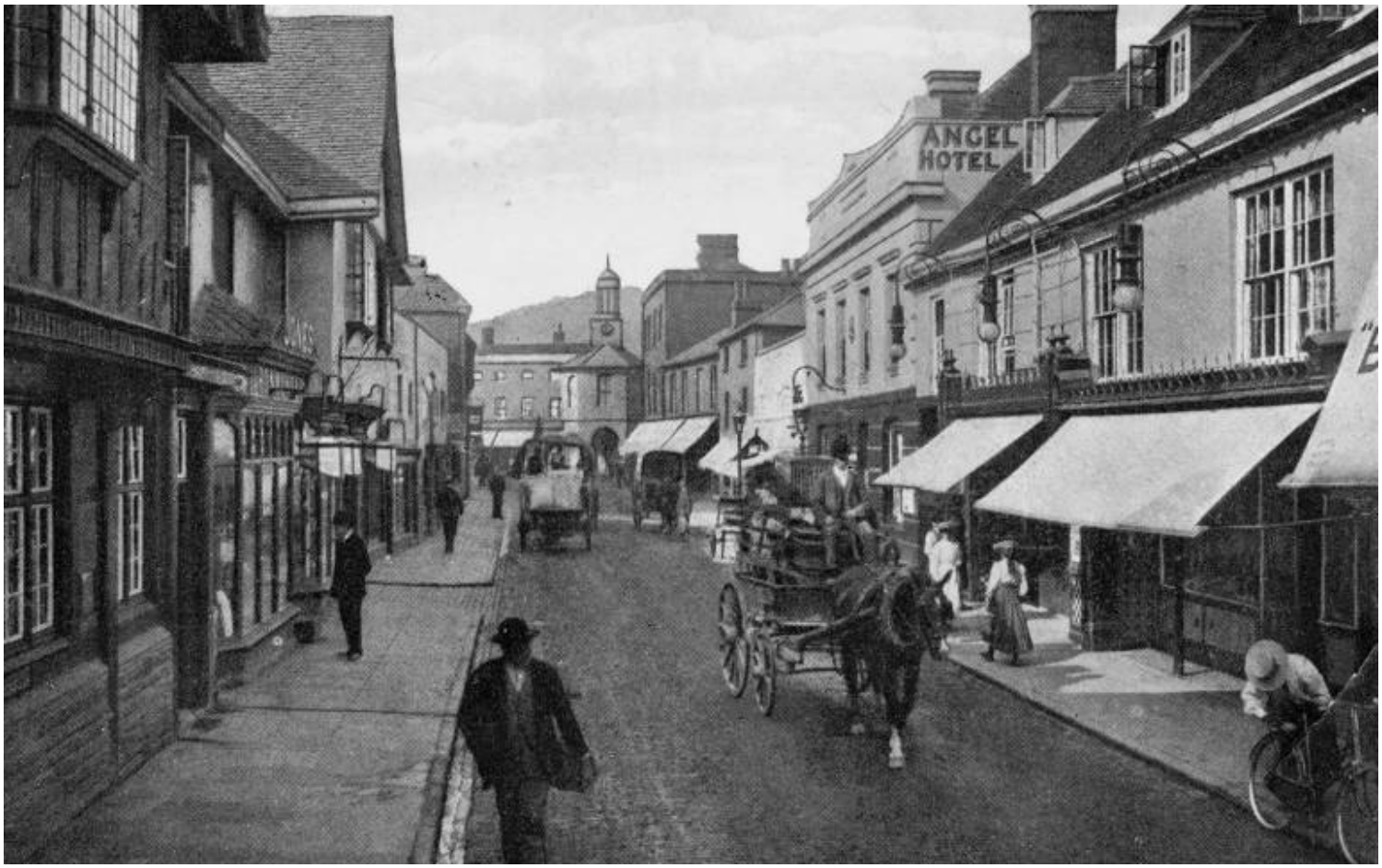
"Godalming has always had this strong pedigree of independent businesses," says town council clerk Andy Jeffery. "This was really cemented in the Seventies when other towns around us were being redeveloped and transformed as bigger retail areas; we stayed the same so that rather than having the heart ripped out of us we've kept an identity that made it a draw for the unique, smaller retailer."

A 1975 edition of *Kelly's* captures a high street at its eclectic peak. New arrivals included the town's first health food shop, a pianoforte dealer and Waitrose, just one

of 50 branches in the UK at the time, along with Woolworths, Freeman, Hardy & Willis, and a Wimpy burger bar – brands that defined the era and fell out of fashion.

Womenswear, newsagents and electrical goods – currently one, two and three on BIRA's top-10 list of independent business closures in 2017 – were also thriving.

For Stephen Springham, partner and head of retail research at estate agency Knight Frank, the high street may have been king at this point but more by default than merit in his view.



Then and now: how Godalming high street looked in the 1900s and, below, its modern day appearance
Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

"With the exception of huge mail order catalogues, all retail was concentrated in the town centre with out-of-town retailing in its infancy," he says. "In short, there was no choice of alternative shopping location, plus consumer expectations were equally low.

"The Seventies also saw major revisions in wider town planning with pedestrianisation becoming far more widespread as new towns such as Bracknell, Harlow, Stevenage and Crawley provided a blueprint as to how a modern town centre should be configured. But the jury is still out as to whether this is of benefit or detrimental to the character and health of a town."

Godalming's Seventies high street, with its two-way traffic flow and narrow pavements, initially resisted such moves.

Anecdotes abound of van wing mirrors hitting shoppers on the pavement and delivery vehicles routinely bringing the street to a standstill until a one-way system was introduced in the Nineties. With opinion divided over the merits of a complete ban on town centre traffic, long-mooted plans for a pedestrianised scheme have resulted with a Saturday-only compromise, introduced in the late Nineties.

John Taylor, Godalming Chamber of Commerce's vice president and owner of hardware store Cornmeter, says that 70pc of the town's retailers remain opposed to extending the scheme.

"In a market town you need the hustle and bustle of cars coming through to create an atmosphere. Retailers' windows are advertising for those driving through. If we don't have this, we're expecting people to walk past, but we can't rely on that any more," he adds.

His own tenure began at the start of the Eighties with the consumer boom and proliferation of supermarkets on the edge of towns. Yet, whereas elsewhere retail giants were squeezing out the smaller operators unable to compete on price, in Godalming, he says, there was less of a power struggle. "From when Waitrose arrived in the Seventies, and Texas Homecare (later converted to Homebase) in the Eighties, both were big statements for the town and actually made a massive improvement in terms of bringing in more people.

"It gave us another lease of life rather than putting anyone's nose out of joint," he says.

Not that every newcomer was welcome. Plans for a Tesco store fell through following opposition from the local business community keen to protect the interests of an independent general store adjacent to the proposed site. It is this "independent first" mentality that Mr Taylor credits with the survival of the high street's four banks and the contrasting fortunes of the thriving Godalming Travel Company with the recently closed Thomas Cook.

He finds the pervasive "digital or die" warning from those who say technology is key to bricks and mortar survival overstated, an example of a disconnect between commentators advising physical shops to be redesigned as "brand showrooms" or click-and-collect points as part of a broader multi-channel retail offering, and the realities of the small independents providing the basics.

"Yes, you can buy glasses online but you're not getting the expert fitting, which may explain why all four of our independent opticians have enjoyed a 10pc year-on-year rise in turnover over the last decade," says Taylor.

Godalming high street today
Credit: Alamy Stock Photo

"In my own case some of my suppliers behind the varnish products are withdrawing from multiples and the internet, and saying they're a waste of time because their products need in-store specialist knowledge and personal service that you are not going to get online."

His own theory as to why some high street retailers fail comes down to something rather more basic – a lack of commitment.

"We do see some people here 'playing' at being shopkeepers; fitting their trading hours around their children's school times so they'll open at 10am and close at 3pm or 4pm, and it's no way to run a business.

"Then you get shop owners who put a manager in and become detached from what the customer really wants. I'm at my till 90pc of the time, making sure the lines are constantly assessed and updated. My customers come back, and they're prepared to travel from 20, even 40, miles away."

It's something which is reflected more broadly across the UK, according to Tim Downing, director at estate agents Pygott & Crone, who says that with shopping at out-of-town retail parks slowly shifting online, the high street is reverting back to the busy commercial and residential centre of the past.

He says: "There's a movement of shoppers wanting to deal with retailers on a smaller scale, with independents dealing in tangible goods, as more and more

innovative and interesting boutiques and start-ups are coming into the marketplace."

Julie Drummond, owner of lingerie and swimwear business Sheer Delight, also benefits from a loyal clientele, some of whom are prepared to travel from as far as Salisbury and even Devon for a specialist fitting service. However, she hasn't been immune from what commentators coin the "showroom generation" – those who look in the physical store but buy online.

"I've had people who came here to be fitted, then bought a bra elsewhere and actually returned complaining that it didn't fit as well as the one they tried on here, not appreciating that it's a completely different style and quality," she says.

Frustrations aside, she cites the popularity of the town's monthly farmers' market as evidence that an appetite still exists for community shopping. The event is a key part of the local council's efforts to boost the shopping experience in the town and accompanies plans to convert space above the shops into flats for young professionals.

Ed Cooke, chief executive of retail property expert Revo, believes it is a worthwhile approach.

He says: "You need to take the high street back to the vibrant places where people wanted to live. Today, less people own cars, or use them to shop. Younger people are living alone longer, and older people are just living longer.

"Both groups don't need as much space and they want to live near work or near where they want to be to enjoy leisure time.

"The marriage of work, convenience and leisure is coming full circle, with retail part of this lifestyle shift."

His sentiments are echoed by Al Young, creative officer at St Luke's, an advertising agency, who says 21st century retailing can learn much from the past.

"If you look at the urban village – the lanes in Brighton, Winchester town centre – their ability to draw crowds of eager shoppers wanting to deal with familiar faces is timeless. The success of these hubs can be read in part as a backlash to the pressure on retail to be ever more digitised and 'omni-channel'," he comments.

Perhaps when it comes to breathing new life into the high street, it is a case of back to the future.