

Material for Section B

An article by Kevin Rushby

The high street* that came back from the dead

It's the stuff of nightmares. You wander down a road where most of the shops are boarded up. Moving on swiftly through a rising tide of discarded takeaway food containers, you reach the only entertainment in town: the tattoo parlour. You start running now. Even the charity shops have closed down. You wake in a sweat, praying that this isn't a vision of the future for the British high street.

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The figures, however, suggest these scenes are uncomfortably close to reality. According to the Centre for Retail Research, more than 11 000 major high street outlets have gone bust since 2008, affecting almost 140 000 employees. Although 2008 and 2012 were the worst years, the last year has been traumatic too. It's not only clothing manufacturers, such as Jaeger, who have gone under: photo studios, ice-cream parlours, pet-grooming centres, toyshops and bike shops have as well.

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The one consolatory note of recent times has been that cafés and restaurants were doing well. No more. The accountancy firm Moore Stephens reports more than 1500 restaurant insolvencies in the UK in 2017, and says that almost 15 000 are under threat.

One group not going out of business appears to be the experts commissioned to report on the decline. A typical comment goes: 'Higher spending can be generated by a diverse town centre which can satisfy customers' needs for immediate purchase of the goods they want.' In other words, if it's in stock, people might buy it. Among all the reports on high streets, the one that stands out for its clarity and intelligence comes from the retail guru Mary Portas. In 2011 she laid out the problems: supermarket sprawl, out-of-town shopping, the internet and poor communication between councils, traders and landlords. She concluded: 'We have sacrificed communities for convenience.'

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What's certain is that the traditional high street of the last 50 years, founded on chain stores and well-known brands, is undergoing a brutal transformation. There are, however, signs of what might emerge from this period of revolutionary change.

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In York's Bishopthorpe Road I settle down in the window of a high-street café-restaurant-bakery. Beppe Lombardo's Sicilian food outlet, Trinacria, is full of people having coffee, some are sampling the impressive range of homemade pastries and cakes, while a clutch of children linger near the ice-cream display.

'When I came to York in 2001, there was no good ice-cream,' says Lombardo, his expression hinting at the profound shock he had felt. 'Not like proper Sicilian ice-cream.' He waves to a friend outside on the pavement. He not only brought Sicilian ice-cream to York, he also brought a high standard of sociability and friendliness. He's involved in plans to stage a street Olympics and a dog show, and to use street art to engage with visitors. Does he worry about the economic downturn? 'We're doing OK here. I don't think we need any more cafés and restaurants, but things are OK.'

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Bishopthorpe Road is one of a few high streets that have bucked the downward trend, managing to revive and reinvent itself during one of the harshest retailing recessions ever. That's in stark contrast to York's premier shopping strip, Coney Street, where 20

per cent of units lie empty. What really hurts is that some of these outlets are the most beautiful storefronts in England. 40

Just over a kilometre away, a stroll down Bishopthorpe Road reveals many of the elements that are on everyone's wishlist for a decent local high street: a handful of excellent cafés and restaurants, hardware shop, chemist, baker, two greengrocers, a couple of small supermarkets, pub, bike shop, delicatessen and butcher. Most are independent; many have won awards. The street was voted Britain's best high street in 2015. 'Bishopthorpe Road fully deserves the title,' said Marcus Jones, government minister for high streets at the time. 'We'll be sharing Bishopthorpe's top tips with other high streets across the country to make sure others learn from their success.' 45

What's really fascinating about this success is that it's not a glamorous location, a street laden with tourist attractions or backed by upmarket housing; it's a socially mixed area and, at first glance, a very ordinary British shopping street. How did it pull off such a trick? 50

I go to see Johnny Hayes, co-owner of Frankie and Johnny's kitchenware shop, and Andy Shrimpton from the Cycle Heaven bike shop. Both were instrumental in turning Bishopthorpe Road around. 'When the post office closed, I really thought we were in trouble,' says Hayes. In fact, it was the start of the upswing: 'Two things happened. We got the Pig and Pastry café opening – local owners who knew everyone and worked hard to make a brilliant little place to eat – then in 2010 Andy came to me with an idea.' 55

'I was inspired by cycling trips to Copenhagen,' says Shrimpton. 'There was a sense of neighbourhood and community ... I thought, why can't all cities be like this?' 60

It was a simple plan. Gather all the shops together under one website, and launch it with a street party. 'It was a eureka moment,' says Hayes. 'At 18:00 we closed the road to traffic. There was hardly a soul about. We set out a few stalls. By 18:20 there were 3000 people out there. The butcher gave away burgers, there were bands, people were dancing. I couldn't believe it. I realised there was so much good will. I thought, "We're going to be all right."' 65

*The main street and often the principal shopping area of a town.