

What is to become of the Small Town High Street?

The dilemma we all face as to the future of the small High Streets is very hard. Here in Kent we have some thriving High Streets, Sevenoaks for example is trading well and the new Marks and Spencers is a real bonus. Sevenoaks is a 25 minute commute into The City and therefore attracts an affluent population. Deal also manages to thrive, winning the Daily telegraph High Street Of the Year 2014. Here there are a selection of great independent shops mixed with the usual multiple offerings. Perhaps one of Deals plus points is that it is quite a long way to anywhere else, Canterbury can be 35 – 40 minutes away. Also there is a good sized Sainsburys actually in the town.

It's a slightly different story in Cranbrook, jewel of the Weald of Kent with a decent commute (just under an hour on the train to London) and an excellent selection of Schools in both the private and state sectors. However the town is starting to suffer as a number of retailers are retiring and new shopkeepers are simply not around. The Crane China shop for example ceases trading at the end of the month and The Find Ladies fashion shop needs to find a new retailer after the fab owners decided on a gap year for themselves and made for foreign parts after trying too hard to generate a commercially viable business; the new owner trades only on a Saturday and the shop is up for sale again. Rumour has it that another much loved shop is closing soon, but lets face it we all buy our major entertainment electrics on line now, as much as we would love to support local businesses most people are feeling squeezed and simply cannot afford not to. However we still have 2 butchers, bakers, fruit and veg shop, kitchen shop, number of gift shops, fabric shop, small electrical shop, carpet shop and of course a good smattering of charity shops and coffee shops. Interestingly a new coffee shop opened last year, Cocolicious, and people queried whether there was demand for yet another coffee shop (at least 5 other places I could have a coffee in town) but the local owner seems to have found a gap, its buzzing and offering the atmosphere and quality that customers want.

Slightly out of town and The Hartley Coffee shop and farm shop appear to be thriving, certainly by the number and quality of the cars in the car park. Car Parking is a huge factor, we are all so lazy and knowing that we can park right outside is a real plus. The shop itself looks like a mini Harvey Nicholls food hall, with an on site bakery and butchers and deli counter and fruit and veg section all offering good value; where you can get stung is with all the lovely add on specialist food and gift products. Its a real bonus for Cranbrook. The old Hartley Dyke farm shop has moved about a mile away to Charity Farm and both seems to be trading well, again a real plus for the Cranbrook area.

So back to the High Street itself. A new development has finally started on land which includes the Old Hospice In The Weald shop, previously a garage, and a large area to the rear. I understand that there will be a mixed scheme of residential, offices. Great, we need to bring back residential to the town and also need modern office space in the town. I appreciate that farmers need to diversify, times are tough for them too, to this end there are a number of out of town office complex in former farm buildings in the area, but actually we need the office workers back in the town centres.

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