

Decline or transformation? You decide.

Fifty odd years ago, someone in the Highways department changed the traffic flow on Hensingham Road so that you no longer automatically drove into Whitehaven, you had to choose to do so and the main road itself was diverted to by passing the town. It was a small physical change but a major psychological change and the start of a depressing trend for the small retailers in the town centre.

By the time we arrived, 26 years ago, the supermarkets were just starting to have a negative effect on the high street. For some reason that I've never been able to fathom, planners allowed them to set up camp on every entrance to the town, complete with their free car parking. Whitehavens town centre became the retail alamo in a way that no other town in the County has repeated so avidly.

Its worth noting that when we arrived, there were still shops like Mark Taylors, Birkets and Lambs for quality clothing, Peter Hendrens Camera shop, and no fewer than five wine competitors including Jeffersons and Victoria Wine. Shop by shop they all dwindled away but the panic didn't seem to set in until the crash of 2008 and the loss of the High Street champion, Woolworths. The years that followed saw a renewed interest in stopping the rot, and the answer was seen to lie in bringing more life to the centre, hence Albion Square.

Sadly, just as Albion was starting to show promise and it felt like the High Street had been given some oxygen, Covid 19 came along and with it, social distancing in workplaces and the feeling that it was somehow naughty to visit any shop other than a supermarket.

The result, at least temporarily has been that many local stores including ours have have done two things; first, we've drastically reduced our opening hours to cut costs but second and very importantly, many of us have ventured into ecommerce for the first time, with a strong emphasis on click and collect; yeah, we've all copied Argos, the model that everyone thought was dying pre covid!

The challenge for all of us now is persuading shoppers to use local shop websites and to stop giving it all to Jeff Bezos. Its a genuine 21st century challenge because when shoppers open their browsers, the psychological drive to national chains is much the same as the one that made folk have to choose between turning left into Whitehaven or going straight on towards Workington all those years ago.

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