

Superstores: What the Shopkeepers Say

Written by Andrew Warmington

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Throughout the recent debate, one of the key issues has been what the effect will be on local shops if Sainsbury's and/or Tesco were to open an out-of-town superstore on Leaden Way. The vast majority of Ledbury people like the current High Street, but views diverge sharply on how we think it should develop in the coming years.

Many opponents of Tesco and Sainsbury's fear that an out-of-town superstore would have a disastrous effect on the High Street, with many independent traders cutting jobs or closing, being replaced by charity shops, takeaway food outlets and pound shops if at all. Others want a superstore but either believe that this would not damage the town or simply don't care either way.

And then there are those who want a superstore precisely because they dislike the local shopkeepers and actively want them put out of business. They claim that most of the shopkeepers don't live here and have an easy life, while occupying precious parking spaces to the exclusion of 'real' Ledbury residents.

Look, for example, at these comments, culled from various posts on the local pro-superstore Facebook group Ledbury Supports Sainsbury's (LESS) over the last two months. Amidst the many complaints about the lack of evening, Sunday or even extended Christmas Eve opening – in what is not, we can all agree, a modern retail destination – are the following.

One administrator of LESS writes sardonically “we can't have proper shops in Ledbury that would be unfair to our current shops ... we musn't do anything to push Ledbury forward you know”. (So we don't have ‘proper shops’ here, then?) Encouraging LESS members to write in support of Sainsbury's planning application, another says: “Depends on whether you want a town run by a few dictatorial traders or a town that caters for the people”.

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Some see Ledbury as full of posh gift and knick-knack shops selling things that local people don't want or can't afford. (Actually these shops are about 10% of the High Street: I know, because I counted). Some apparently see local shopkeepers as the rich town establishment, cynically denying ordinary Ledbury people the benefits of modern retail convenience they enjoy wherever it is they are supposed to live themselves.

They realise it is not worth opening because they can't provide what Ledbury people want at affordable prices

- In late December and early January, I went to as many independent traders as I could – from butchers to greengrocers, florists, sweet shops, everyday shops, chocolate makers and clothes shops - to ask what their feelings were. In retrospect, this wasn't the best time to have chosen – some were taking the only week off they get in the year – but I spoke to 11 in all.

The answers, naturally, varied. Shopkeepers are like that: shrewd, entrepreneurial, determined to be their own boss, sometimes contrary but always knowledgeable. As many told me, they earn their living this way not for the money, which is not very good or even very predictable, but because it's in their blood. Many inherited businesses that their parents built from scratch.

All of them recognise that there is little or nothing that they can do once a superstore is in place, because there is no going back then. Their attitude depends partly on how much they are in the direct firing line, though all expect to be impacted directly or indirectly.

Caroline Handley, who has run **Handleys Organics** and the farm near Bromyard that supplies it on and off for 20 years, is categorical. She will close the shop as soon as the lease is up if an out-of-town Sainsbury's opens. It would be a complete waste of time, money and effort to try competing against their huge buying power.

Another who fears that he may be out of business next year after 40 years in the town is Mark Jenkins, owner of **T.A & M.A Jenkins**, the greengrocer on the Homend. Even so, he says that he is not totally against superstores and understands why some people want one. "You can't be selfish," he says - rather charitably in my view, since clearly some people can be!

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Sarah Handley, who runs the clothes shop **Sez**, believes the effect for her own shop and the town as a whole, will be “disastrous”. Customers have told her that she would not be affected, but she has already learned from her fashion agents how their customers have disappeared in small market towns where giant superstores have opened.

Ben Boyle, who runs both **Celebrations** and the **Velvet Bean**, sees strong competition on many lines for the former, less for the latter, which is more unique in its offer as he makes most of what it sells himself. The major worry for him is the potential loss of footfall from the High Street as a whole, to the detriment of all.

Indeed, when I ask the shopkeepers what they expect the effects of an out-of-town superstore to be, most don't start with their own business, though they generally think there will be at least some detrimental effect on that. They are mainly concerned for the High Street, because they know it is a single, organic entity that lives or dies as such. The loss of any shop is a loss to them all.

“With Tesco and the Co-Op where they are, we are all Dave should know a bit about this. Before he started his business in Ledbury 35 years ago, he worked in Worcester, where there were about 20 independent butchers on the Shambles area alone – it's a shopping centre these days, of course. Now, he believes, there is not a single one left in the whole of the city.

Whilst he is naturally concerned about the effect a superstore might have on his business, which employs three generations of his family, Dave does not fear going under. Jim Bodenham, who manages the **Llandinabo Farm Shop**, is also confident that, as Herefordshire's only rare breeds butcher, his business has a strong enough niche to get by, but he too worries for the High Street.

As a prime example of how our High Street shops are interdependent, Jim cites the local sandwich shop that he used to supply. In the end, he put them straight onto a wholesaler instead. “I could make a few extra pounds as a middleman, but it's better for me that he stays in business,” Jim says.

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“We rely on passing trade,” says Sarah Handley of Sez, echoing this same point. “If the people aren’t coming out to by a newspaper, they aren’t coming to my shop to look in the window.”

The current Tesco is part of this interdependence, partly because it offers free car parking and partly because it is located on the High Street. Many traders value this greatly. For instance, Chris Westbury, who runs **C. Westbury Shoe Repair**, remarks on how often customers leave shoes with him to collect after they have been to Tesco and back.

Sainsbury’s, predictably, denies that a superstore will have an impact on Ledbury’s High Street. But their own projections show that it must. Some local shopkeepers have looked at the economics and say that a store on that scale cannot make a profit unless and until it kills the High Street, enabling Sainsbury’s then to set prices as they please.

The supporters of a superstore often talk about ‘choice’. And it seems obvious: a big supermarket can stock more lines than a small one. But beware: although a giant Sainsbury’s will potentially sell anything, every single product has to justify its space on the shelf. Those that do not make a suitable profit margin are soon gone.

Independent shops, by contrast, can sell whatever the customers want to have there. Jim Bodenham says that he makes his best profits from prepared meat products like pies and sausages, hardly any from cheese. However, his customers want him to sell a selection of cheeses too, so he does.

Tony Isaacs and his sister Elizabeth Carrington-Stait, who run **Issacs Shoes** on the Homend, stress that they have nothing against Tesco or Sainsbury’s as companies. Indeed, their parents set up the first self-service ‘supermarket’ in Ledbury in the 1960s, where their shop and **Isaacs Linens**, run by their brother Duncan, now stand.

Their concern is with the proposed location of these stores. Either might compete to a small degree against them, but what they fear losing is the footfall from the many people who park at Tesco or the Co-Op and walk up and down the street to them. For all that those who only drive to Tesco now deny it, this is what really happens in Ledbury. It won’t happen from a store in Leadon Way, over 15 minutes walk away.

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The competition effects from an out-of-town superstore are not always direct. Jayne Creswell, who runs **Little Shop of Wonders** on Bye Street expects the cross-over between her stock and a Sainsbury's to be fairly limited. However, there might well be an impact from losing the Saturday buyers for childrens' parties who might switch to doing that on their Friday night shop in a superstore.

Tourism, as both Dave Waller and Jim Bodenham point out, is one of Ledbury's big earners, if not the biggest. People come to Ledbury for the historic buildings but also because they like to shop here in our unique High Street. They won't come again if they find it decimated by a superstore, with a quarter of the shops empty.

"I have had a lot of customers from elsewhere who have asked about the superstores and said that this had happened to their towns," says Rita Dorling, who runs the **Charisma** clothes shops. "They say we should fight to stop it happening here too and many signed the petition against the Tesco development."

Many others echo this, saying that in the summer season they get people from all over buying in their shops who say how lovely Ledbury is, how much they appreciate the unique High Street. This does not just apply to the gift shops that the pro-superstore campaigners so dislike. Mark Jenkins, for instance, has people coming in from all over to his greengrocers to buy local produce.

This process benefits the whole High Street. Kat Griffiths says that some new customers came to her flower shop **Bamboo** at Christmas 2010, then came back last year and said that they had done all of their Christmas shopping in Ledbury. Needless to add, they found it a much more pleasant experience than dealing with the vast scrums at retail parks or city centres.

(Kat also has direct experience of what happens to small towns when a superstore opens. She started her career as a florist in Leominster and saw first-hand how the town was devastated when the giant Morrison's opened up on the edge of town. Its state, she says, is "shocking".)

The shopkeepers I spoke to were unanimous on one point. They are not anti-supermarket as

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such – one, who asked not to be named, thought an out-of-town Sainsbury's, though not a Tesco, might be a good thing for jobs, though most agree that the net effect is likely to be negative.

Some have first-hand experience of the jobs question. Caroline Handley recently had to lay off all her seasonal staff because a supermarket reneged on a supply deal. If she has to close her shop, up to six people may be out of work, not including those on her farm. These are the statistics that we won't see alongside the headline banners about all the jobs Sainsbury's claim to be creating.

In addition, as Ben Boyle points out, when local traders employ people, their spending power stays local. He has five employees, who live, work and shop in Ledbury. Superstores siphon the majority of their turnover out of the area and into the pockets of shareholders and senior managers.

Nonetheless, the traders understand why some of their customers want the Sainsbury's. Most use supermarkets or go out of town for non-essentials. They are also fair about the deficiencies of the High Street, most obviously for childrens' and mens' clothes. Some say that the younger generation who will presumably occupy most of the 800 houses to be built in town won't have grown up using High Street stores and Ledbury must adapt to this.

As Dave Waller says, we need and must have supermarkets. The issue with this one is first the location and secondly the sheer size of it. Not one of them would object to an expanded Tesco on the Orchard Lane site and most would positively welcome it. Kat Griffiths and the shopkeeper who did not want to be quoted both said, unprompted, that this would be "brilliant".

Caroline Handley, who has never set foot in a supermarket in her life, still has no problem with the current two, saying they "complement the town wonderfully" and hopes that Tesco does expand. Tony Isaacs and Elizabeth Carrington-Stait feel exactly the same way. They wonder, indeed, why Tesco did not build bigger from the outset.

So, what will our shopkeepers do if an out of town superstore comes? The answers vary. Very few have made specific plans, not knowing exactly what will happen, but shopkeepers are resourceful people, who have to adjust to sudden changes in trading conditions as the price of

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being their own boss. All have known good and bad times.

Jayne Creswell says that she will have to up her game and be different enough to continue attracting other customers; if that fails, they may have to find another line of work. Tony Isaacs says that he may have to do more events, as they used to do in the past when these accounted for a large chunk of the business, and use the shop as a “glorified warehouse”.

The convenience of buying everything under one roof is obvious. It is not, always cheaper. Jayne Creswell sells the Sylvanian Families set for less than Toys ‘R’ Us but struggles to convince a generation brought up to believe that the biggest retailers must be the cheapest. And Tony Isaacs notes wryly that Trading Standards would be “down on me like a ton of bricks” if he altered his prices up and down the way Tesco does.

Some people think the local shopkeepers are coining it in and have an easy life. Those people are plain wrong. Caroline Handley is up to be in her shop before dawn most mornings before returning to run the farm, often working into the evenings. The Christmas-New Year period is the one guaranteed break she has every year.

Similarly, Jayne Creswell minds other people’s children as well as her own while running Little Shop of Wonders alongside her husband. In the evenings, he teaches piano lessons to make ends meet. Their work never stops. Only a fool would open a small shop in order to make pots of money.

“Ledbury High Street didn’t happen overnight,” says Elizabeth Carrington-Stait. “My mother’s and father’s generations and previous generations before them worked hard to make it what it is. And as time goes by, the more unique it gets.”

Before he died, she adds, her father prophesied that one or two companies would come in and put everyone out of business, then eventually it will come full circle and towns will be built with separate butchers, bakers and other shops, just like they used to be. I hope we never have to find out if he was right on either count.

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So, you have heard what the traders say and what at least some members of Sainsbury's local fan club think. If you think the same as LESS, join them and fight for their vision of Ledbury – you have a right to. If not, we and the vast majority of the local independent traders urge you to join the fight for our vision of the town.