

# The rights and wrongs of convenient shopping

Supermarkets are passionately championed and doggedly hated – with their supporters and opponents almost equally divided.

For many, a spacious air conditioned store with every kind of merchandise under one roof and at competitive prices is an earthly paradise.

For those who hunger for the days when an assistant would locate your soap powder, slice your bacon and still find time for a friendly chat, charting a path through a vast maze to fill a bulging trolley is a bleak nightmare.

Theories about their usefulness, locations and effect on the economy are also split – and alter with the way the current political winds are blowing.

The Greens and the environmentalists are generally in the opposition camp as there is no question that despite the many benefits – cheaper and fresher food, jobs and one stop convenience – chaos has come in their wake through the closure of small local shops and havoc on the roads.

Richmond upon Thames and Hounslow, among Greater London's most prosperous boroughs, were among the first areas to accommodate the retailing revolution in the early seventies and are still suffering some inappropriate intrusions.

Chiswick had an enormous Sainsbury's built several decades ago in the heart of its shopping centre opposite Turnham Green Common which brings traffic to a standstill – something that would not find favour with today's planners.

Richmond was spared the invasion of a



## The Malcolm Richards Column

superstore in its epicentre – mainly because land costs are prohibitive and listed building protection limits the sites available, but has finished up with a small Tesco Metro in George Street and a Waitrose on the Lower Richmond Road.

Brentford has had Somerfield in its high street for two decades and Twickenham a Tesco in London Road for three. Both are in central locations for which they would be unlikely to get permission in the current climate.

For years Richmond upon Thames council resisted pressure to allow Marks and Spencer to sell food in Kew Retail Park – which is off the already overloaded South Circular Road – although it eventually caved in and allowed limited usage.

By an odd twist of fate Sheen was served by two side by side: an upmarket Waitrose which proved popular to the point where South Circular traffic was affected – and Safeway, which had arrived earlier but was pushed into second place as its cut price offers and cheaper lines found little favour with the affluent shoppers who live on its doorstep and prefer quality to low prices.

Not surprisingly Safeway finally accepted the inevitable two years ago and pulled out – leaving a huge high road site empty – to be immediately snapped up by its popular rival.

In theory it should have been a simple matter for Waitrose, with its proven track record in the locality, to secure planning permission to double the size of its retailing area and car park. It was after all only proposing to continue the existing usage and where car queues are commonplace.

In fact things have not proved so easy and those who live around the site have protested vehemently that plans put forward are ugly and overbearing (even

though the present Safeway building is a hideous relic from the worst period of British architecture).

And they point out that year by year small shops that have survived against all the odds, like greengrocers, delicatessens, butchers and bakers continue to bite the dust, leaving the once lively high street for the estate agents, banks, restaurants, building societies and designer clothes.

Yet there must be a case where a sensible compromise can be arrived at, as limited extended car parking would improve access and a larger store would serve residents needs for a quality food outlet more effectively.

The fact that 18 months on permission has still not been granted is not because of a deficiency in our planning procedures but a tribute to the way our sensitive system reacts to controversy. The delay should ultimately lead to a more satisfactory and sensitive decision being fashioned.

In many ways the influence supermarket chains are wielding and the enormous profits they generate are disproportionate to their social usefulness and the services they offer. There is a huge danger that their dominance will lead to corporate monopolies and soulless, characterless plastic high streets. Any expansion needs careful consideration.

If Waitrose can be persuaded to come up with a project that offers better and more convenient services without dwarfing the East Sheen shopping scene and obliterating the useful small shops that have to date survived, it will be a credit to local democracy.