

# Great West Road proves an insight to our social fabric

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The news that the former Glaxo building on the Great West Road, Brentford, is to be converted into a residential complex of 400 flats with a hotel, shops and restaurants, is another indication of how the country's commercial development is mirrored by the changing face of the Golden Mile.

That dwellings that are taking over from the giant manufacturing plants that once displayed their handsome facades to those on their way to the west, reflects the radical change our society is undergoing.

Many of the original art deco structures which sprang up before the last war were the best examples of their kind in the UK and have been given protection. The Gillette building is similarly covered by conservation orders. Current proposals for a giant hotel and office complex means this too has to be confined within the existing elaborate edifice that has been a massive red brick logo for the shaving empire for three quarters of a century.

The Romans built a road linking Brentford with Staines when they established a capital in London and the Bath Road took their architects to Somerset. The A4 was not opened until 1927 however – although, according to the records, discussions about the need for a bypass were first started in 1807.

It was constructed to relieve the congestion on Brentford High Street, where there were frequent jams – even when horse drawn transport dominated.

The design was ambitious and far-sighted, as who would have thought when it was on the drawing board that a six lane highway complete with wide pavements and cycle tracks would so quickly be filled



## The Malcolm Richards Column

to capacity. In its 79 years history the western artery has reflected the UK's commercial and industrial history, accommodating headquarters for the country's most successful businesses such as Beecham's, Smith's Crisps, Mercedes, Rank, Gillette and British Oxygen.

The road quickly became one of the busiest and most important highways in Britain, carrying hundreds of thousands of vehicles each day to the south west and Wales, while the impressive buildings elegantly conveyed their commercial credentials to the occupants of the passing vehicles, more effectively than the huge

advertising hoardings that are now emblazoned.

The sixties and seventies saw the arrival of office blocks meeting a new kind of mercantile need and in the eighties when the industrial sector was being wound down it looked as though the area would develop into a Californian type Silicon Valley. In fact this never materialised.

Some minor shopping outlets like PC World, Currys and furniture stores moved in and more space was taken up with warehousing, but no clear pattern emerged. Now the dawning of the 21st century, with its new prosperity has brought a new hunger for homes and hotels.

When the M4 viaduct was opened in the sixties it meant that the two highways incorporated ten lanes in two tiers and a trail of juggernauts and speeding cars pounded by ceaselessly day and night.

Which raises the question of whether these sites are suitable for new habitats. Soundproofing may be highly sophisticated, double glazing and insulated walls can baffle most of the external noise and air conditioning can filter polluted air that emanates from busy highways – but is this really how people want to live?

Barrett obviously think so. They appear to have no problems marketing their ambitious plans already underway for two, three and four bed apartments. Meanwhile many former office blocks surrounding it are derelict and awaiting their fate. If our economic prosperity continues, their uses will continue to echo the way our social fabric. If there is a recession they will be a sorry symbol of past wealth and power.