

Starbucks veto is vital to stopping growth of the retail park

The headline 'Starbucks turned down' which appeared in a recent issue might seem of trivial importance in a paper that featured the £10 million Star and Garter house controversy and a £5-million school shortfall - but it has serious implications for this part of London.

Kew Retail Park has been a headache for planners since it first reared its ugly head some 15 years ago. The old Lib Dem council battled valiantly to prevent a supermarket being established there, but were beaten when Marks and Spencer took up residence.

The store was originally forbidden to sell food but after using its corporate strength, finally secured a licence on a 25 per cent of floor space usage basis.

The consequences of allowing the area to develop as a major shopping centre is still being felt and the Marks and Spencer sector has magnified this twenty fold. It undoubtedly adds congestion to the

already overburdened Mortlake Road and aggravates the South Circular's bottlenecks. Despite having a bus that serves it from Richmond the enclave attracts mainly car bound shoppers which flies in the face of government policy on out of town shopping.

In its early years the retail park had great difficulty in enticing shoppers and extensive advertising campaigns in this and other newspapers made little difference, as it offered few incentives for people who were well served in surrounding areas.

However, everyone - the council, the developers, the existing shop owners - knew that the only thing that would put this into reverse was to allow some sort of food outlet to open. The bid by Sainsbury's was fought off but Marks and Spencer, so popular with Middle England, played a subtler game, initially accepting that it could only sell clothes and then changing course - a

modification that should never have been allowed to slip through. There is no question that the wrong shops are in the wrong place but now it is a fact of life we have to live with it for the present at least - learning from past mistakes.

The land was originally a modest industrial estate where companies like Dodge Cars and Smith Craps had a low key presence. When manufacturing declined the land owners looked to retailing to fill the gap. And nothing but trouble has followed.

Kew Residents' Association has put up an excellent case against expansion and we must count our lucky stars that we have grass root organisations with the skill and know-how to oppose the multi-national companies where they try to steamroller their way into small communities.

The association's secretary Frances Carter, who lives only a few hundred yards away, has been passionate in her

opposition as she points out the more it expands the more it will suck business from other areas - like the charming parade around Kew Station - and the greater will be the backlash on the South Circular.

The Richmond Society set an example of how to fight off corporate intrusion with tremendous success when it opposed McDonald's moving into Richmond back in the eighties. The fact that this campaign limited the branch to a small low key outlet in The Quadrant, has helped fend off other takeaways from the town.

Councillor Serge Louric, the Lib Dem council leader's assertion that Starbucks would have been the straw to break the camel's back is brave and far-seeing. As he points out, the retail park may be successful commercially, but it is operating at full capacity and a coffee shop or take away would be an overdevelopment.

Station Parade has many pubs, restaurants and wine bars and cafes to cater for those who want somewhere to relax and socialise - as indeed does Sheen, Richmond town centre and Chiswick High Road. There is absolutely no justification for allowing a new form of business that would lure even more car bound customers to the area.

Like it or not, Mortlake Road is part of the South Circular and one of London's main arteries. It is one of the worst pinch points. Transport for London and enlightened local authorities are doing everything they can to limit traffic growth and sustain businesses from introducing further car bound shopping.

We desperately need to cherish the small businesses that have survived the 'march of the multiples' in the last two decades and bind them to our souls with hoops of steel battle.

malcolmrichards@rtttimes