

REVISITING THE FIRST WAVE OF RETAIL DECENTRALISATION: BRITAIN'S FIRST OUT-OF-TOWN STORE

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Abstract

The view of successive waves of retail decentralisation provided by Schiller (1986) provides a powerful metaphor for out-of-town retail developments in the United Kingdom. Yet, even before the first wave of food superstores, there had been other examples of off-centre retailing of which the GEM store, which opened at West Bridgford, Nottingham in 1964, was the first. However, that store was a collection of licencees operating as a quasi-department store, rather than a true superstore or hypermarket. This paper investigates the GEM store through its planning and construction phases, and reflects on responses to its opening and experiences during the early period of trading, culminating in it being acquired by ASDA Stores in 1966. Attempts are made to assess local impacts, which, while somewhat hampered by scarce data resources, suggest that adverse effects were limited, and that local shopping provision has managed to prosper and diversify alongside the GEM/ASDA development. More recently, the site has become subject of major redevelopment proposals, and the planning processes associated with this newest phase are contrasted with those for the original store. The paper concludes that the original store concept and style of trading reflected the very different social, economic, legal and retail environments of the mid-1960s, although some themes (such as an early attempt to promote leisure retailing) have familiar echoes today. It seems that public concern, awareness, and influence over retail planning is far more sophisticated now than had been the case in the 1960s.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In most perceptions of the evolution of retail location and structure in the United Kingdom, the idea of successive waves of decentralisation, as portrayed by Schiller (1986), remains a powerful metaphor. Schiller's first wave of food superstores was followed by non-food superstore developments, and then a third wave of comparison shopping. Latterly, the significance of the third wave has been questioned and further waves hypothesised (Ferne, 1995). It would seem that the first wave of food superstores, though, is accepted as an important component of British retail history. Yet interestingly for such a significant phenomenon, relatively little is known about the initial nature of retail decentralisation in Britain. Our knowledge of early retail decentralisation tends to be focused around studies into impacts (e.g. Lee and Kent, 1976; Department of the Environment, 1976) which were undertaken several years after the first such stores had commenced trading. Indeed, in Schiller's original presentation of the model of three waves, he refers to the first wave as occurring during the 1970s, and involving supermarket companies opening large new stores outside town centres. If that is accepted, then this paper is more about a development which pre-dated the first wave of the 1970s than that wave *per se*. In the light of this apparent lack of attention to the earliest examples of decentralisation, this paper returns to the first example of a major, decentralised retail development in Britain – a store which opened in West Bridgford, Nottingham in 1964 – with a view both to increasing understanding of events in the mid-1960s and tracing the history of that site.

2. WHAT THE LITERATURE TELLS US ...

Despite the significance of the opening of the GEM store in West Bridgford in 1964, representing as it did the first tangible sign of decentralised retailing in Britain, much of the British retail literature has little or nothing to say about the event. Furthermore, some of what it tells us is misleading! For example, according to one source, the first superstores in the UK “were developed in 1965 in Leeds (Asda at Crossgate) and at Nottingham (Gem, now Asda) ...” (URPI, 1976). Guy (1994, p. 126) notes the West Bridgford store as the first example of a hypermarket in Britain, and correctly dates it as having been constructed in 1964. However, as will be shown, the store that opened in 1964 differed somewhat from

what would today be considered a typical superstore or hypermarket. Cox had previously speculated on the original form of development more accurately:

“Space leasing of the G.E.M. type at West Bridgford could possibly become more prominent in the future and, offering 100,00 (*sic.*) square feet of sales area and a diversity of concessions on the peripheries of large towns to cater for the motorized shopper, they encourage special journeys.” (Cox, 1968, p. 6).

In fact, that original format did not prosper or proliferate, and thus when Davies (1976, p. 193) included the GEM store at West Bridgford among “a miscellaneous group of free-standing superstores” which were “generally found on the outer margins of the city, in what may be regarded as ‘off-centre’ locations”, by then that was probably a true reflection of the evolution of the store format at West Bridgford.

Giggs (1972) provides the most thorough analysis of the store in its early years, based on 1969 survey data. That study described the store then as “a self-contained low-price convenience shopping centre, similar to discount houses found in the U.S.A.”(p. 263). The store had a total floor area of 110,000 square feet (10,200 sq.m.), and parking for over 1,000 cars. However, some 40,000 sq.ft. were accounted for by a large warehouse and coldstore to the rear of the store. Although built by Gem International Supercentres Incorporated, it had been acquired by “Associated Dairies (A.S.D.A), a Leeds-based firm” (*op.cit.*). Giggs then describes the store’s location, characteristics of the catchment area, and its wider setting relative to other centres in some detail. At that time, “a large proportion of the selling space” was still contracted to local retailers, although the holding company could achieve economies of scale through centralised buying.

Overall, then, there appears to be some uncertainty in the literature concerning this first example of British retail decentralisation, with the more detailed sources relating to the store at West Bridgford in its transition from its original form to a more familiar hypermarket/superstore format. To rectify that confusion, it may help to focus on the genesis of the store and its earliest phase of trading.

3. THE PLANNING PHASE.

Quite why GEM selected the West Bridgford site must largely be a matter for speculation. Although little directly is known about the site selection and planning processes, undoubtedly there were extensive

researches undertaken by GEM: according to Jones (1969, p. 20), the company inspected over 300 sites over a 3 year period, of which 30 were inspected closely. When the planning application for the West Bridgford site was received in September 1962, according to the Nottingham *Evening Post* (25.9.62) GEM had already applied for a development in Birkenhead which was going to public inquiry. Subsequently, the company's spokespersons gave more positive impressions of why West Bridgford had been selected. GEM's Manager of Development, Architecture and Operations later said the site had been chosen as it was central within the country and in a "thriving industrial area" (Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 7.11.64).

Public awareness of the proposed store probably came with news of the planning application in September 1962. The main story on the front page of the Nottingham *Evening Post* of September 25th told readers:

"An "out-of-town" shopping centre covering an area of 14 acres with parking space for 1,500 cars is planned for West Bridgford. Based on an American idea, the centre, which is primarily for the motorist shopper, is the second to be proposed for this country."

The agent for the developers stressed it was targeted at the motorist shopper, "and was not really intended for near by residents alone".

In late October 1962 the County Council indicated that it was not opposing the development in principle, although was referring the application to the Minister as it represented an alteration to the Town Map. Discussions by West Bridgford Urban District Council (WBUDC) were pre-empted by a letter of 18 December 1962 from the Minister effectively 'calling in' the application. Public concerns were, though, voiced by trading interests. The Nottingham-based National Union of Small Shopkeepers were vocal in their objections. Their president (Mr. Tom Lynch) said: "These trading interests must not be allowed to clutter up vacant lots of land with supermarkets. We hope local authorities will not be stampeded into granting planning permission for more sites by the big building interests." Also expressing concern were the West Bridgford Chamber of Trade, whose secretary was quoted thus: "We have no legitimate grounds for complaint so long as the shops are used for fair trading. At the moment the information we have on this point is so vague that we cannot do anything about it." (Evening Post, 23/10/62).

A public inquiry into the proposed store development was held in April 1963. The official report of that inquiry (Nottinghamshire County Archives) summarises the main arguments put forward. GEM's representatives stressed that they intended to sell 'middle quality goods'. The case for West Bridgford Urban District Council emphasised opposition from the West Bridgford Chamber of Commerce on the possibility of discount trading or trading to members. Assurances were given by GEM representatives that cut price or discount trading were not contemplated and would not be undertaken, and that no membership scheme would be operated, with the store being open to general public. Objections were heard from several local traders and West Bridgford Chamber of Commerce but neither the County nor Urban District Councils objected (*Evening Post* 2/4/63). Other insights into the tone of the inquiry are gained from press reports that a GEM executive was quoted as saying the centre would "not be garish or flashy", and GEM's legal representative, Mr. Silkin, suggesting that the development would employ about 300 people, and three quarters of these would probably be female. Mr. Silkin was also quoted thus: "... services would not be on the lines of the present day supermarket" as "more infrequently required services" were to be offered.

The Proof of Evidence of Mr. Littwin (of GEM) includes estimates of the approximate areas to be allocated to each of the licensees (see table 1). To those departments were to be added "minor departments", such as a travel agency, photo studio, optical department, and maybe also a bank and post office. According to Mr. Littwin, these allocations were to "meet the need of the community for better shopping facilities, under better conditions, and with a wide range of goods close at hand".

The Proof of Evidence of the Deputy County Director of Planning seems supportive of the development, which it was suggested would substantially increase the total volume of trade transacted in West Bridgford, "in which local traders will have the opportunity of participating". It argued that a 'business focal point' was already established thereabouts on Loughborough Road, and existing car sales businesses generated significant traffic already. The council had received a petition in objection from 62 local traders, however.

In a letter to the UDC of 6 September 1963 the Minister for Housing and Local Government granted planning permission subject to two conditions: details of the site lay-out and such like were to be agreed with the local planning authority, and no industrial use was to be permitted.

Post-Print

Table 1: Licensees' approx. areas as estimated at the Public Inquiry: (sq.ft.)

Men's Clothing	4,500	Sports goods, toys	2,500
Women's Department	8,000	Hardware, Ironmongery	4,000
Children's clothing	5,000	Fabrics	3,500
Shoes, footwear	2,500	Furniture	4,000
Linen	3,500	Automobile accessories	2,500
Supermarket	8,000	Jewellery	2,000
Drugs, stationery, books	4,000	Electrical goods, TV	2,000
Curtains, carpets	2,500		
		TOTAL:	58,500

4. THE CONSTRUCTION PHASE

After obtaining outline planning permission, various consultations seem to have continued. In October 1963, a GEM spokesman in London emphasised that the company were building a "One-stop shopping plaza for drivers" and would be addressing the West Bridgford Chamber of Commerce (*Evening Post*, 22.10.63). In November 1963, letters were exchanged between surveyors working for GEM and WBUDC regarding population figures - as part of the store letting exercise presumably - which suggested local roads and a nearby railway line "will rather limit the draw to the area primarily as Nottingham is within such easy reach" (letter from SH Chippendale & Co., 15/11/63).

In May 1964, a hand-written note was placed on file at WBUDC giving the expected store area as (approx.) 400 feet by 200 feet, which seems to have been part of a calculation about load bearing estimates. That note coincided with a report in the *Evening Post and News* (4/5/64) that a West Bridgford resident was "conducting a one-man fight against what he calls 'a risk to the area's health'" and had called on his local MP for help. Trouble had occurred when workmen began to dig up a former council tip in readiness for "a £2,000,000 out-of-town shopping centre project". The man alleged there was a "stench and danger to public health", and he had written to his local MP, and also asked the police and local Medical Officer to visit the site. There was talk of seeking an injunction to halt the work. He added that at the public inquiry local residents were promised that full details of the scheme would be given to them, but these were not yet forthcoming. Later it was reported that WBUDC's Health Committee had held an emergency meeting to consider complaints from people living near the site that the old tip had been disturbed causing an unpleasant smell. The former tip was believed to cover 2 acres of the 14 acre site, and had last been used for tipping in 1959 (*Evening Post and News*, 14/5/64). Council records show that a meeting was held in

London between the UDC's Health Committee and representatives of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government on 2nd July 1964. It was concluded that the work was incidental to the granting of the planning permission and thus legal. However, over subsequent weeks several letters were received from local residents concerning a perceived health risk, and speculating on the risks for food retailing especially.

In October 1964, a letter was sent from WBUDC to GEM pointing out that it would not be acceptable under the 1950 Shops Act to close for half day closing on Monday mornings; half day closing had to occur on an afternoon unless agreement to the contrary was reached among the local trading community.

5. THE OPENING OF GEM.

Local press coverage of the opening of the GEM store in West Bridgford in November 1964 provides an insight into how the centre was perceived. Firstly, we are reminded that although the store was later to evolve into a typical – if large – ASDA format, at the time it was anything but the sort of hypermarket or superstore format we might now expect. The company's own initial advertising heralded the store's opening thus:

“Tomorrow is GEM day – the opening of Britain's first one-stop one-level department store.

With over 50 huge departments selling everything from fashion ... to furniture ... to food - all your favourite makes and brands at competitive prices. Plus a restaurant, hairdressing salon, petrol station and FREE PARKING for over 1,000 cars. This is shopping as you want it! Like it! Streamlined. Modern.

Convenient.” (Advertisement in Nottingham *Evening Post and News*, 6 Nov 1964, p. 21).

The advert also listed 25 departments as examples, and apart from food, household goods, furniture and clothing, these included a pharmacy and cosmetics department, sporting goods, records, toys, wines and spirits, jewellery, cameras, optical, shoe repairs and carpets.

The notion that the store was a department store was reflected in some news coverage too: “Britain's newest department store, which has more than 50 departments on one floor, will be opened today on Loughborough Road, West Bridgford” (Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 7 Nov 1964). However, the

headline under which that report appeared was less consistent by declaring “Bargains mark 50-shop store opening”. In fact, the GEM operation relied extensively on franchised outlets within the overall GEM proposition, and thus did not fit traditional models of the department store format perhaps. Nor did the confusion over what the store represented end there, with the store being variously described as:

- “a £2,000,000 out-of-town shopping centre project” (*Evening Post and News*, 4 May 1964);
- “a big American-style supermarket” (*Evening Post and News*, 14 May 1964)
- “the revolutionary £500,000 GEM supercentre” ... “It is, in fact, a complete department store and more.” (*Guardian Journal*, 7 Nov 1964);
- “a new American style supercentre” (*Guardian Journal*, 9 Nov 1964);
- “new-style shopping plaza” (*Guardian Journal*, 10 Nov 1964)
- “Superstore” (*Evening Post and News*, 9 Nov 1964)

The GEM format was, then, one which challenged contemporary concepts of retail formats, and pre-dated academic and statistical attempts to formalise definitions of such stores.

Press publicity on opening day included a view from GEM’s Manager of Development, Architecture, and Operations on the store’s focus: “With all the facilities we offer him, free parking, petrol, accessories and tyre service, you could call this the motorist’s shopping centre”, although he added “Not at the expense of his wife and children. We would like to think we cater for all the family.” (*Guardian Journal*, 7/11/1964); the publicity also stressed the hairdressing salon and pram park. There was a community room seating 300 people available to local groups. It was reported there was “80,000 sq.ft. store space”, and that the lowest priced petrol in the county was on offer. It was noted that “GEM do not give trading stamps. Their aim is a quick turnover achieved by a large and satisfied customer rate, which they say, in effect, must mean value in any accent”. Stores at Leeds and Bournemouth were to follow with further expansion foreseen.

6. THE EARLY DAYS

On GEM’s opening day, West Bridgford “faced one of its biggest traffic crises ... when its roads were held in the grips of a jam causing widespread traffic dislocation” and “chaotic conditions, which existed all

afternoon and were not cleared until 6.15". The store had had to be closed several times to clear the 'mass of shoppers' in the food hall through the 'pay-out counters', and a 'conservative estimate' put the number of visitors at 30,000 in the day. The car park had been full and parking had spilt over into nearby residential streets, promoting requests on the store's public address to move cars to prevent blocking private drives. It was estimated that around 5,000 vehicles were in the area at the busiest time. A GEM executive described the customer response as 'overwhelming' (*Guardian Journal*, 9/11/64).

In the aftermath of that first day of trading, the *Evening Post and News* (10/11/64) attempted to assess initial impacts on the small parade of shops opposite the site entrance. It reported that these traders were not losing business as had been feared:

- A grocer had counted 500 customers on that busy Saturday of the store's opening compared to 430 on a normal Saturday;
- A butcher and fruiterer said: "It was fabulous. We have never served so many customers in one day". His only worry was parking on his forecourt by GEM customers.
- The chemist had expected a 50% drop in takings, but actually had enjoyed an increase, although traffic was seen as a danger to future trade.
- The hardware shop had seen no difference in trade, and doubted many of Saturday's visitors would return.

However, it was reported that the National Union of Small Shopkeepers was seeking discussions with various authorities. It had also been announced, and reported in the same article, that waiting times for on-street car parking in the city centre were to be extended.

Reactions seeking to ease traffic problems the next Saturday followed. Spare land at the back of site was to be used if problems recurred (*Guardian Journal*, 10/11/64). Extra police were to be on traffic duty, and GEM themselves had hired four policemen to help organise on-site parking (*Guardian Journal*, 14/11/64). However, it seems that the extreme conditions of the first day of trading did not reoccur.

Just after the Nottingham GEM store opened in 1964, a local magazine, *Nottingham Topic*, carried a two page feature on what it called the 'Gem giant', in which it predicted 'a period of adjustment'. Summarising the content of that article shows it to have been quite perceptive in anticipating many of the issues and areas of dispute which were to characterise the debate on retail decentralisation in ensuing decades. According to the article (Nottingham Topic, 1964):

- It was too early to judge its impact;
- “.. if the unusual exterior, with its complete absence of windows, is something to shock our smaller-scale senses” first impressions of the interior were of size. “Bright strip-lighting set in the largest unbroken ceiling in the country, illuminates what would otherwise be a seemingly endless black cavern”
- The more than 50 'departments' “include everything from diamonds to diapers, mothballs to motor accessories”.
- Departments were run by concessionaires, but few were local companies. Each concessionaire bar one professional practice had “submerged its identity into the GEM scheme of things”; most concessionaires were “nationally-known companies with the financial resources necessary to participate in a project which is completely revolutionary as far as this country is concerned.”.
- The aim was seen as trying to convince the British to do their shopping under one roof at one time, through the appeal of what the General Manager of Merchandise called a 'fun deal'. The fun deal included 1,000 free parking spaces, cheap motor fuel, sales promotions, and promotional gimmicks such as a 'Chimps' tea party'. According to the General Manager:

“Within minutes of parking the car the family will find so much to see and do. While mother is having her hair styled in our superb salon, father and the children will be browsing around the multitude of departments ranging from toys to automobile accessories or having a snack in the restaurant”.

- Extended opening hours were another area of innovation in 1964, with the store opening 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Saturdays, and remaining open until 8.00 p.m. on Thursday and Friday evenings. The tradition of half-day closing was maintained on Wednesdays, however, and Sunday shopping was still decades away. The *Topic* noted that “This sort of thinking makes sense in an age when the percentage of working wives is high”.

- A paragraph which perhaps highlighted wider and more general arguments to follow argued thus:

“Another aspect of the GEM philosophy which is likely to capture the imagination of the British public is the site of the store. Outside the city boundaries in West Bridgford, it attracts people away from the already hopelessly overcrowded city centre. It is significant that since its opening the store has had a beneficial, rather than adverse effect on the trade enjoyed by other shops in the area, and those on The Parade * in particular”.

- “The next few months will constitute a period of adjustment. Nottingham shoppers and those who come from further afield – as they must if the project is to succeed – must reconcile themselves to a way of shopping hitherto quite foreign to them. The concessionaires must adapt their sales approach to fit into a completely new environment; and GEM Supercentres Ltd. must modify a completely American concept to the rather more conservative taste of shoppers in this country.”
- The article concluded by posing questions: about problems of consistency and quality control, about the breadth of the appeal across income groups, about how the centre might evolve and if local companies might seek entry, about local congestion worries, and the durability of the ‘fun deal’.

Overall impressions of that article are perhaps conflicting to retail scholars in the last years of the century. Looking back nearly three and a half decades, we can still see familiar and persistent themes in that depiction of the arrival of decentralised retailing in the United Kingdom, perhaps. We may also be reminded of the changes that have occurred to revolutionise the retail environment since then in areas such as building design and opening hours. In particular, we may be encouraged to reflect on the evolution and adaptation that did occur, both locally and nationally, to the original supercentre concept.

7. THE GEM STORE IN OPERATION.

On 3rd December 1964, Nottingham Co-Operative Society’s Managing Director, Mr. C.J. Forsyth wrote to WBUDC requesting clarification of the terms of GEM’s planning permission, anticipating a “change in selling policy”, though available records do not make it entirely clear what was being expected. However, several months later such a change did become apparent. In August 1965, the *Evening Post and News* (23/8/65) reported a protest by Tom Lynch of the National Union of Small Shopkeepers over a ‘discount

move'. GEM leaflets had been delivered throughout West Bridgford announcing the new discount policy. Mr. Lynch protested that it had never been said that GEM was to be a discount store. He was also critical of free buses being provided from the Clifton housing estate and a 'free' gallon of petrol promotional offer. The issue here was soon to gain national attention, as the GEM store at Leeds, sixteen weeks after its opening, soon adopted a similar policy:

"After months of trial and tribulation – poor sales figures, troubles with licenses – G E M International, the American discount chain which brought one-stop suburban shopping to Britain just under a year ago, have now launched a new discount policy which they are convinced will bring them success.

The G E M method of selling is to provide the building and facilities, and contract with retailers to operate departments with it. Licensees trade anonymously under G E M merchandising methods. They pay G E M anything from 2 to 10 per cent on turnover." *Sunday Times*, 12 September 1965.

The *Sunday Times* article continued to give examples of several licensees who had pulled out of the Leeds store, such as Peterwood Ltd. of Denbigh, who sold lingerie and children's wear, and objected to being told how to run their business, and especially how to merchandise. At the West Bridgford store, it was reported that concessionaires such as Boots, Willerby, and Times Furnishings had pulled out. GEM were still, though, talking of a 30-50 store chain in the UK, but expecting it to take between two-and-a-half and three years for the British operation to break even.

In November 1966, Nottingham's *Guardian Journal* reported that the directors of GEM International and Associated Dairies had announced that they had reached an agreement whereby ASDA Stores – a subsidiary of Associated Dairies – would acquire a majority interest in the sharecapital of the GEM operation and its subsidiary GEM Super Centres (17/11/66). The food and grocery departments in the two GEM stores at Leeds and West Bridgford were to operate henceforth under ASDA management. Thus the GEM experiment in Britain effectively ended, and the Nottingham store's transition to the now familiar ASDA format began. It took several years before all concessions were acquired by ASDA, but the process was well underway. However, emphasis here is less on the evolution of the ASDA company (but see Jones, 1981) and more on the initial impacts and experiences of GEM/ASDA in West Bridgford.

* The small parade of shops opposite the entrance to the GEM/ASDA site.

8. WHAT ABOUT LOCAL IMPACTS?

A paucity of reliable sources on occupancy of retail premises in West Bridgford since the last available commercial directory of 1956 (Kelly's, 1956) makes detailed assessments of commercial change difficult. The Parade, a group of small shops almost opposite the GEM/ASDA site, would be a prime candidate for direct impact perhaps, notwithstanding the very early talk of increased trading cited above. Here, in 1956, were 10 retail outlets, which, notwithstanding changes of name or ownership, mostly survived beyond the opening of GEM. By the early 1970s, based on personal interviews, four of these outlets had closed (hardware shop, draper, grocer, supermarket) to be replaced by a DIY/Garden shop, a second hand car dealer, and two service uses (betting shop; launderette). However, the closure of the supermarket had occurred in the late 1950s, reflecting local restructuring by Nottingham Co-operative Society. The shift to service uses has continued since then, with an insurance broker and a hot food take away replacing two of the former retail uses (food shop; DIY/garden). Two units (chemist; CTN) have remained in the same broad areas of retailing since the 1950s. Of course, these changes in many ways reflect general shifts in British retailing, but given the almost unbroken occupancy of all units in the centre, the most serious implication that might be drawn of the effect of GEM/ASDA on this small cluster of retail premises is that there has been a shift to service trades. From exclusively retail occupancy at the time of GEM's opening, two service uses appeared by the early 1970s, and by the late 1990s the number of service uses had increased to four in those shops, with an additional two units in service occupancy also having been added.

Somewhat more detailed records exist for West Bridgford town centre, for which Goad plans have been published since 1973. This town centre is a 'minor district centre' with a little under 50,000 sq. ft. retail floorspace (Hearn & Partners, 1988); it is just over one mile (1.6km.) distant from the GEM/ASDA site. One view of impact here would have to be that the centre's overall prosperity continued through the 1960s and 1970s up to the present. Throughout the years since GEM opened, the centre has seen periodic renewal and rebuilding of elements, considerable infilling, and marked peripheral expansion, both newly built and converted. Most notably, in the late 1980s, Greater Nottingham Co-operative Society relocated from a supermarket site in the heart of the district centre to a more peripheral but nearby location where a new 21,300 sq.ft. store with over 100 car parking places was constructed.

Using Kelly's directory and relevant parts of Goad plans, it is possible to measure use changes in the core of the centre, meaning that part of the centre surveyed by Goad in 1973 (and not including areas then not contiguous or subsequently changed to commercial uses). The results of this exercise, summarised in Table 2, show that food retailing has maintained a remarkably consistent presence, despite internal changes, throughout the study period, and no significant change can be defined either side of the opening of GEM in 1964. However, other retail sectors have expanded with the growth and redevelopment of the centre. Personal services remain relatively stable in numbers, but major growth has occurred in financial and professional services. The apparent rise in vacancies in 1983 should be viewed with caution, and certainly cannot be directly attributed to the GEM/ASDA competition, as five of these six vacant units were new units (in three cases with nominated tenants) constructed on the site of a former garage and petrol station. Thus, again, it is difficult to argue a major negative impact resulting from superstore competition. It seems that the growth of West Bridgford's catchment, and its continuing prosperity, allowed local shopping and services to prosper and diversify alongside the superstore alternative. Indeed, now the ASDA superstore is but one of the several such competitors for local shopping in the traditional centres.

Table 2: Commercial Uses in West Bridgford Town Centre, 1956-93

USE	1956	1973	1983	1993
Food & drink retail	10	10	10	10
Clothing, drapery	5	5	6	7
Other retail	8	15	12	16
Banks, Building societies	2	3	8	8
Personal services*	5	7	6	6
Professional services**	0	5	7	9
Garages	2	2	1	0
Cafes, restaurants	2	3	2	2
Cinema	1	0	0	0
Vacant	0	3	6	0

* e.g. hairdressers, shoe repairs, dry cleaners, travel agents

** e.g. estate agents, solicitors, architect.

9. RECENT (RE) DEVELOPMENTS: ANOTHER WAVE?

If the West Bridgford site predates the first wave of decentralisation, the latest phase in the site history may be illustrative of the most recent phase of development. A consequence of the site characteristics and construction, manifested in early public health concerns during the construction phase, is that load bearing

capabilities are limited. Store floor loadings have posed problems for some goods handling practices, there have been frequent floor repairs, and the car parks have required considerable maintenance also.

In Spring 1998, plans for a major redevelopment of the site were announced. The existing store was to be demolished after a new store with a 10,000 sq.ft./929 sq.m. greater sales area had been constructed (taking it to 65,000 sq.ft./6,038 sq.m.). Employment would rise from 430 to around 480 (*Nottinghamshire Commercial Property Weekly*, 24/3/98). Within days, letters of protest appeared in the local press suggesting these proposals were counter to Government policies for greener transport, and would increase car usage. It was suggested that air quality would suffer, and that the company should agree to a package of traffic reduction measures such as home deliveries, and encourage cycling and walking. It was also suggested that this expansion would undermine plans to improve West Bridgford town centre (*Evening Post*, 28/3/98). ASDA arranged meetings for local residents to explain their plans, but reports persisted that local people were dissatisfied (*Evening Post*, 1/4/98). Pressure groups such as the Local Area Forum Transport Group and the West Bridgford Community Association also expressed concerns. Planners sought to open negotiations on traffic matters with the company. Eventually, more than 50 letters of objection were received by the District Council as well as two petitions containing over 100 signatures. ASDA's proposals were modified to include a cycle path, covered cycle parking, and a donation to the County Council of £100,000 to encourage alternatives to car use, including a bus lane on Loughborough Road (*Evening Post*, 25/7/98). When planning permission was granted, 24 planning conditions were attached, including restrictions on opening hours and commercial vehicle movements, and fumes and noise limitations. However, trading would be permitted until 10 p.m. Mondays to Wednesdays, and to midnight on Thursdays and Fridays (*Evening Post*, 29/7/98).

Compared to the initial development, then, although both resulted in development being permitted, in the most recent case not only was there far more organised opposition, but also negotiations to extract elements of 'planning gain' from the company. It remains to be seen, of course, if this is an isolated case of superstore redevelopment reflecting the special circumstances of the West Bridgford site as have been

detailed already, or a new phase – even another wave perhaps – of decentralised retail (re)developments in a new era of planning constraints and commercial readjustments.

10 CONCLUDING REMARKS.

What broad lessons might then be drawn from this single but historically significant example? Among the more significant factors perhaps are the following:

- The political environment for retailing in the mid-1960s was very different to that in which most later out-of-town developments occurred. It was a time when Resale Price Maintenance topped the political agenda for many retailers. This meant that competition was essentially non-price in the earliest phase, although that was to prove a short period. Even major stores were still tied by the 1950 Shops Act, so opening hours were relatively limited by modern standards, and early closing day still to be observed. Nor were there any established planning policy guidelines on out-of-town retailing.
- The social environment also differed. Despite seeing the significance of rising female employment, GEM assumed that most car drivers would be male, and planned and promoted accordingly.
- The development was seen as foreign, and especially American. It was its size and style that attracted most initial attention, more than its potential impact, especially as decentralisation could be seen as positive, in diverting trade away from the congested city centre.
- What we came to know as leisure shopping was an implicit element of the initial promotional mix, albeit in what now appears somewhat dated terms.
- Opposition to the original development was, by later standards, relatively muted. Local traders' organisations and very nearby residents were the main source of opposition, while planners expressed relatively little concern at that stage. Even the opposition from trading interests was largely constrained to aspects of 'fair trading' it seemed. Thus when GEM's representatives assured the Public Inquiry there would be neither discount trading (although soon there was) nor membership restrictions (which there never were) at the store, most of their opposition was defused. Land use issues or impacts on other centres were not major themes in the early 1960s, although there was some emphasis on job creation. The Inquiry was, by subsequent comparisons, brief and focused.

- More recent proposals to redevelop the site have met with more informed, organized, and articulate local opposition than did the original application. Since the 1960s, the public have become more aware of issues surrounding out-of-town shopping, and more protective and pro-active on behalf of their local environments. In the 1960s, dissatisfied residents were seeking influence and, more significantly, information after construction had begun. In the late 1990s, redevelopment was not permitted until the company had apparently made concessions to residents and local pressure groups. Permission to redevelop was, though, gained by ASDA.

Probably the most significant point, though, is that the initial experiment was largely unsuccessful. Yet it was to turn out to be arguably a convenience-shopping wolf (ASDA) in comparison-shopping sheep's (GEM) clothing. The most significant aspect of the development, mixing metaphors, was its Trojan horse nature. The short lived GEM experiment gave ASDA specifically an entrance to superstore-style retailing, and more generally provided a precedent for later developments. However, in the local setting there is little evidence at all to say that the effects were adverse. Local shopping provision has developed in a strong and healthy manner alongside both long-standing and more recent out-of-town competition.

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