

## Shop 'til you Drop - A Shopping Revolution

As Bicester's long awaited town centre redevelopment takes shape, local historian, Peter Chivers, asks if the new town centre will revitalise a once prosperous and dynamic retail experience that served the needs of generations of residents?

The Bicester shopping experience is not dissimilar to many market towns that cover the length and breadth of the country. The foundation of Bicester Priory in the twelfth century boosted local trade and this, coupled with the establishment of street markets in the town, fostered trades and crafts to service both priors and residents alike. Market stalls were replaced by more permanent structures as shops developed in the medieval Market Square and the adjoining streets.

The development of Sheep Street added to the retail mix as the town expanded to serve the surrounding agricultural economy. By Tudor times a thriving town centre formed the heart of the community. A variety of local traders in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries offered goods ranging from foodstuffs, clothing and hardware to fine crafts. You could purchase everything that would provide for your needs from the cradle to the grave, a pattern that continued until comparatively modern times.

In the twentieth century long established family businesses provided quality retail choice and service to their customers. Many of these businesses survived until recently. The likes of Ashmore's ironmongery shop or The Handy Stores are still remembered fondly by many residents. Evans or Layton's Department Stores offered a range of goods that could fully equip any home. High class grocery businesses added diversity to the local retail scene.



Sheep Street 1910 Final market

The development of public transport, car ownership and the emergence of national retail chains did much to transform the High Street both nationally and locally. The changing face of Sheep Street over the past decades reflects how shopping patterns have changed. Supermarkets replaced the small local grocery and fruit and vegetable shops and other independent retail outlets were lost in a similar way as multi-national stores established a presence.

Out of town shopping developments replaced the town centre as a shopping destination; larger towns within easy reach of Bicester provide greater shopping choice for many; and, of course, Bicester Village has established its

presence as a premier shopping destination, visited by four million shoppers a year.

Can the new town centre reverse this trend? Certainly it will look very different to the town centre of old, but that's progress. It is to be hoped the redevelopment will stimulate a greater use of existing facilities and that additional retail and leisure amenities will attract locals and visitors alike. Bicester town centre has an opportunity to regenerate its commercial, social and cultural amenities. Will the chance be seized to recreate a thriving and dynamic town centre as was the case in past centuries?



21 Sheep Street, 1919 International Store



Market 1974



Market Hill Hedges Staff