No week goes by now without an article on shops closing in Greater Manchester's town centres, and indeed high streets across the country. Every analysis of future prospects is gloomier. For once the pessimism is justified. Not only is identikit retail the front line of consumers belt-tightening, but even as the economy bucks up, credit conditions will never (repeat, never) return to where they were, meaning consumers will borrow and spend less than before. And if that weren't enough for the shops, our way of spending is transforming. Societal shifts are difficult for folks to conceive, yet they do take place. Imagine life without any sort of police force, but so it was little more than a hundred years ago.

One thing the UK is a global leader in, is internet shopping, with over 10% of retail sales already on-line. This will only rise, as trends like click and collect have hardly begun. Yes, there will always be things people want to walk into a shop for, but our means of accessing goods and services continues to widen and diversify, with ever more roads leading to ecommerce and multi-channel retail, and away from the high street. Not too long ago, no parade was complete without a travel agent. Before our very eyes estate agents are becoming similar things of the past; and banks will one day follow. And that's all without the self-inflicted wounds of out of town shopping centres. Things, as they say, can only get worse.

Javelin, one of the better retail analysts, puts numbers to this, evidencing 21% less non-food retail space in the next 8 years, and 31% less stores. By then over one third of non-food shopping will be internet-based, and that even those old-fashioned bricks and mortar establishments left standing will see reduced space productivity and margins.

No amount of euphemism and mary portas can stop this armageddon. Few can take it in and process that even as a sixth of our high street shops are empty today, in a very few years there will be a third less still. Too many landowners and others with vested interests have no strategy but to sit it out and await the status quo ante, meaning that despite the unfolding drama, the prevailing dictum is hold on to your hats until the storm passes.

Prognosis is of course easier than prescription, which is perhaps why I've left that few words. Amongst them are that centres must shrink, retail be shepherded to consolidate, that there should be more houses and schools, and above all different centres need distinctive functions, segmentations and niches, like leisure, healthcare, managed workspace, markets, festivals and seniors, all to attract more footfall from further away. Bold and sweeping might fail; not being so is certain to.

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