

## Why ARE stores and banks closing in Burgess Hill? – Leader Update 7

In recent months and weeks, Burgess Hill has been subjected to an unprecedented number of store and bank closures or ‘closing down’ intentions, giving rise to the impression that our town has driven them away. Various reasons have been put forward; lack of footfall, no reason to come to town or ‘why hasn’t the Council done more to stop them?’

It is a fact, **whether we accept it or not**, that stores and banks that are closed or closing are all part of multi-national businesses that are going through restructuring due to a downturn in face-to-face business. Let’s take these as examples:



Whilst **Costa** is still a strong brand, the Coca-Cola owned chain has been subject to a number of controversies over the past few years and customers have been turning away in droves, choosing instead to support smaller, independent coffee shops. The result has been the closure of more than 25 franchised locations in the last 18 months, two of which, that in the Market Place, Burgess Hill and in Commercial Square, Haywards Heath, were operated by the same franchisee, who decided to call it a day. One could argue that the removal of seating from the Market Place was the main factor behind the Burgess Hill closure but in reality, the decision was made by head office in 2023.

**Shoe Zone** has been closing its stores in great numbers since 2020, having decided to concentrate on larger retail outlets in fewer towns and cities. More recently, the increase in the national living wage, difficulties in obtaining reliable shipments of goods and the changing trend towards online shopping, has reduced the attractiveness of maintaining the High Street presence. Burgess Hill is, regrettably, one of those closures in the latest round.

As for **Millets**, that is a shock of greater magnitude, as the brand has been trading for nearly a century. It is owned by Blacks Outdoor Retail Ltd, who are based in Manchester, who themselves are owned by JD Sports. For some years, JD Sports have been in trading difficulties and in early-2024 issued as profits warning, stating that consumers were spending more cautiously and high street footfall was falling.

It is a fact that more and more consumers are turning to online purchases of sports and camping equipment. Millets introduced an app a while ago with the strap line

*'Don't let a busy lifestyle stop you from keeping up to date with the latest gear. Whether you're in the lakes, on your lunch break or even sat at home, wherever you are you can shop with us'.*

What this has done is to transfer their sales from the high street shop to a warehouse and so they can argue that footfall has fallen to the point where maintaining a shop front presence is no longer viable.

Finally, we can look at **Lloyds Bank** and **Halifax**, the latter being part of the Lloyds Group, both of which are, or were, in Church Road. The whole dynamics of personal and business banking has changed dramatically in the past 5 years, as technology and software improvements have made it possible to carry out most transactions online. We no longer need cash to purchase goods and services, nor do we need to write cheques. All fine and simple if you have the means of doing this but what if you don't? What if you don't have broadband or a fancy phone or are elderly and don't understand technology? That is where the acute problem lies and a solution needs to be found. A banking hub might be the answer?

It is also a fact that the number of regular customers visiting their local branch has fallen to less than **200 a month**, of which 34% are in the age range 55 – 75. That's not many and so it is no surprise that the decision has been taken, nationally, to close branches across the UK.

What can we do, as residents? Maybe stop buying online and use your local shops for all your requirements? Is that realistic? Perhaps we, as consumers, are then responsible for the downward spiral of our High Streets? Food for thought.

**It is not all doom-and-gloom though, as High Streets have been changing for generations and new businesses will come into our town. Remember Woolworths, International Stores, Sussex Stationers? They are our history now and others will follow. We must be positive and do our best to create a better Burgess Hill.**