

Once Upon A Time

Once upon a time there was an idyllic township to the west of Saffron Walden, located at the foot of gently rising hills to the south and with a great plain to the north. The settlement was indeed rich in quality of life. It was a wonderful trading post with a wide diversity of outlets offering quality goods of all descriptions to its populace. Every week cattle and other livestock were driven to its market, and its traders' market boasted many colourful stalls bedecked with succulent fare from local farmers, and a wide array of products from local craftsmen. The town was virtually self-contained, with an abundance of hostelry, a moving picture palace and a hospital. Yes, it was a perfect place to reside in and folks were content and happy with life.

As time went by it is true that the cattle market declined and eventually closed, but the richness and bustle of life continued. Until, that is, a big bad ogre arrived on the scene. He saw how good the exuberance was in the community, became jealous of the traders doing so well, and decided he was going to put a stop to this halcyon scene. He stomped around and finally set up in opposition to them, on the northern outskirts of the town, undercutting all of their prices. So much so that local citizens, not being as wealthy as they had been in previous years, began to forsake their long established suppliers. The ogre's 'palace' sold everything imaginable, was brightly lit, and attracted many inhabitants from other areas across the kingdom.

The ogre became over-zealous and exceptionally greedy and, from time to time, enlarged his empire until it was almost as vast as the traditional township down the road. This obviously dealt a dramatic impact to the little settlement and, one by one, the original merchants were forced to close their doors as trade rapidly declined. During the period of devastation the picture house also cancelled its showings, and the local hospital was stripped of its more important tasks. Buildings began to fall into disrepair and so by now the township appeared very forlorn and run down.

Now this is no work of fiction but, sadly, the true real life drama of Royston battling against a giant supermarket, Tesco. With eight empty units in the High Street alone, the town is now on the verge of terminal decline. It is a broken community. One by one the retail units are being transformed into sandwich bars and restaurants. More current leases are due to expire in the near future.

This, unfortunately, is the dramatic impact that a major supermarket inflicts on a small market town and is mirrored across East Anglia. Fakenham and Aylsham, both in Norfolk, are more recent victims of the out-of-town supermarket syndrome that inflicts traditional town centres. Planning rules regarding this factor need to be urgently re-written. But it is down to councils to defend their local communities by being far more stringent in their efforts to maintain a township that retains its vitality and viability in today's modern world.

Market Harborough's local council in Leicestershire continues to ban out-of-town supermarkets and shopping centres, which results in a superb 'working' community. I suggest that representatives from Uttlesford's planning committee take the trouble to visit the town before allowing the new Sainsbury's planning application, or the Tesco extension for that matter, to gut Saffron Walden town centre.

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