



## **Please, not another grot spot**

Editorial Column – 22 September 2006

We should not dismiss lightly the impact of the proposed closure of Morrison's supermarket on the people of Tunbridge Wells.

For the 116 full-time and part-time staff who will lose their jobs when the former Safeway store in the town centre closes in a month, it is a real, if not unexpected, blow coming, as it does, in the run-up to Christmas.

No one should under-estimate the worry and difficulty this will cause them but, in truth, unemployment in this part of Kent and Sussex is almost negligible and they should all secure new jobs without too much delay.

The customers will also miss Morrison's, of course. It may be less than charming but it is a valuable facility in that part of town and the previous loss of its Post Office and, now, its pharmacy is also a blow.

Yet, after acknowledging all the above, we are more concerned about the future of this 28,000 sq ft chunk of real estate.

What is to happen to the building once all its staff and customers have gone? Morrison's is ducking out with more than 14 years of its lease still to run; can the owners, Canada Life, find new lessees for that time?

The knee-jerk solution is to convert it into flats, as seems to be customary with any large building in Tunbridge Wells these days. Is this feasible? Are there not planning constraints which preclude the abandonment of retail outlets in favour of just accommodation?

The real concern for those who worry about the vulnerable heart of our beautiful town is that this example of the Neo-Brutalist school of architecture will sink into even more awful decline mocking us with its sullen decay.

Will it, in short, become another Tunbridge Wells grot spot? Will it join the ABC cinema, the old Aldi site, the Monson Road balustrade and the ghastly Greyhound pub on the conservationists' roll of shame?

Granted, the complicated private ownership of some of these places makes it all very difficult to monitor and to improve. But, inevitably in these circumstances, we look to the local planning authority to take a lead or even to give the impression that it is actively seeking to address the problems.

Perhaps when all you see from your Town Hall window is the constant rebuke of the cinema site you are inured to what is happening further along the road. Out of sight, out of mind.