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Paul Whysall Prof

^a Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

^b Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham, NG1 4BU, UK Phone: +44-(0)-115-848-2412 Fax: +44-(0)-115-848-2412 E-mail: Published online: 17 Feb 2007.

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GEM, 1964–1966: Britain's First Out-of-Town Retailer

PAUL WHYSALL

Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

ABSTRACT *Britain's first major out-of-town store opened in West Bridgford, Nottingham, in November 1964. Operated by an American company, GEM, it employed a concessionaire system. This paper traces the store from the planning phase to its opening, and provides some insights to the impressions this new retail format created at the time. GEM were not able to produce the results and expansion they anticipated in the United Kingdom, opening just one further store in Leeds in the spring of 1965. After just two years of UK trading the controlling interest in GEM's British operations was acquired by ASDA stores. The paper suggests some reasons for the failure of the GEM experiment and explores local impacts in West Bridgford. It concludes that the short-lived GEM operation may still be significant as a precursor of out-of-town retailing in the UK and an important step in the early development of ASDA.*

KEY WORDS: Out-of-town, retail history, ASDA, GEM, Nottingham

Introduction

In 1964, Britain's first major out-of-town retail store, with a sales area of 79,842 square feet, opened in the Nottingham suburb of West Bridgford. Little has been documented about that historically important event, however. This paper seeks to remedy that, piecing information together from diverse sources.

Operated by an American company, GEM, the store accommodated concessions trading under a single roof. In America, GEM (reportedly an acronym for Government Employees Mart) 'was a members-only discount department store, open exclusively to active or retired members of the armed forces, as well as those who worked for the government' which operated across the USA and had looked to expand abroad.¹ However, no membership constraints operated in GEM's UK operations.

After a spectacular opening in West Bridgford, generating unprecedented traffic congestion, the store's performance proved increasingly disappointing. A second store, opened in converted cinema premises at Cross Gates, Leeds, in May 1965, was also less successful than anticipated, and the planned chain of 30–50 GEM stores in

Correspondence Address: Prof. P. T. Whysall, Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University, Burton Street, Nottingham NG1 4BU, UK. Fax: + 44-(0)-15-848-6512; Tel.: + 44-(0)-115-848-2412; Email: paul.whysall@ntu.ac.uk

Britain soon looked unrealistic. In November 1966, the directors of GEM International and Associated Dairies announced agreement that ASDA Stores – a subsidiary of Associated Dairies – would acquire a majority interest in GEM's British operation and its subsidiary GEM Supercentres.

This paper traces the background to the GEM development in West Bridgford, examines the novelty of this major innovation in British retailing, and explores the demise of GEM. It then attempts to assess GEM's impact on local retailing as well as wider reactions. In conclusion, thoughts are offered on why this early version of out-of-town retailing proved less successful than its owners had expected.

GEM in the Literature

Given its historical significance as Britain's first major out-of-town development, surprisingly, the retail literature has little to say about GEM. Furthermore, some of what it tells us is misleading! For example, URPI (1976) contended the first superstores in the UK 'were developed in 1965 in Leeds (Asda at Crossgate) and at Nottingham (Gem, now Asda) ...'. Guy (1994) notes the West Bridgford store as the first example of a hypermarket in Britain, and correctly dates its opening as 1964. However, the GEM store would not normally be considered a superstore or hypermarket. Cox (1968, p. 6) described GEM more accurately:

Space leasing of the G.E.M. type at West Bridgford could possibly become more prominent in the future and, offering 100,00 (*sic.*) square feet of sales area and a diversity of concessions on the peripheries of large towns to cater for the motorized shopper, they encourage special journeys.

Yet that format neither prospered nor proliferated, and when Davies (1976, p. 193) included the West Bridgford store among 'a miscellaneous group of free-standing superstores ... generally found on the outer margins of the city, in what may be regarded as "off-centre" locations', that reflected the evolution of the former GEM store.

Giggs (1972) provides analysis of the store in its early years, based on 1969 surveys, describing it as 'a self-contained low-price convenience shopping centre, similar to discount houses found in the U.S.A.' (p. 263). The store had 110,000 square feet (10,200 m²) total floor space and parking for over 1,000 cars. However, a warehouse and coldstore accounted for some 40,000 square feet. Although built by Gem International Supercentres Incorporated, it had been acquired by 'Associated Dairies (A.S.D.A), a Leeds-based firm' (p. 263). Giggs describes the store's location, catchment characteristics, and its setting relative to other centres in some detail. At that time, 'a large proportion of the selling space' was still 'contracted out to local retailers'.

Whilst more detailed sources relate to the store in its transition to a more familiar hypermarket/superstore format, there is some confusion over its original nature. To rectify that, it will help to focus on the store's genesis and earliest phase of trading.

Against the Odds: The Opposition to GEM

Although little directly is known of GEM's site selection and planning processes, apparently extensive researches were undertaken. Jones (1969, p. 20) suggests GEM spent three years inspecting over 300 sites, of which 30 were inspected closely. That West Bridgford was the first development apparently reflects favourable local planning attitudes.

GEM represented a major innovation, potentially a new era, in terms of British retailing in the mid-1960s, and thus interest and reaction from established interests could be expected. Yet contrasting impressions emerge regarding opposition to GEM. Awareness of the trials and tribulations of major retail developments confronting the British town planning system of the 1960s and 1970s suggests public inquiries into out-of-town shopping were typically prolonged, confrontational and highly technical (Couper and Barker, 1981). However the brief inquiry into the West Bridgford proposal reveals a lack of substantial, organised opposition. The Nottingham press expected the inquiry to last just two days, and while there were objections from some local traders and the West Bridgford Chamber of Commerce, neither the local Urban District Council nor Nottinghamshire County Council opposed the application in principle.²

This was not entirely unlike GEM's earlier unsuccessful planning experience in the Wirral, where the local Birkenhead Council supported the scheme, although opposition had come from Cheshire County Council and traders' groups.³ By comparison with later experiences of would be out-of-town shopping developers, a 50 percent success rate from two relatively short inquiries, with little opposition from local councils, appears almost welcoming!

GEM's management portrayed a very different picture. Within a year of the West Bridgford opening, GEM's chief executive/managing director Jim Kalal was blaming 'jealous competitors' for rumours that GEM stores were for sale,⁴ and soon after claimed opposition had set in before the first store opened in Nottingham from planning authorities, trade associations, manufacturers, shopkeepers, and even concessionaires:

From the outset not sufficient account was taken of the innate conservative outlook, the ingrained prejudices of the trading community in this country, and the attitudes never encountered in all our operations in the US.⁵

There was conviction at the heart of the company that British retail institutions and local government opposed out-of-town shopping, although Kalal said he was confident of the future of 'one-stop discount stores for the motorised shopper' in the UK.⁶ While Kalal places blame for GEM's failure on envious competitors and local vested interests, it will emerge that major problems for the stores involved a less than enthusiastic response from potential concession operators and a disappointing consumer reaction. While the former may be seen as innate conservatism perhaps, more realistically it was disappointing trading that discouraged concessionaires, mirroring limited attractiveness of the offer to the shopping public.

A New Type of Shopping?

The novelty of this first out-of-town store should not be underestimated. Although the store would evolve into a typical – if then large – ASDA format, initially it was anything but a typical hypermarket or superstore. Advertising heralded the store's opening thus:

Tomorrow is GEM day – the opening of Britain's first one-stop one-level department store.

With over 50 huge departments selling everything from fashion ... to furniture ... to food – all your favourite makes and brands at competitive prices. Plus a restaurant, hairdressing salon, petrol station and FREE PARKING for over 1,000 cars. This is shopping as you want it! Like it! Streamlined. Modern. Convenient.⁷

The advert listed 25 'departments', including food, household goods, furniture, clothing, a pharmacy and cosmetics department, sporting goods, records, toys, wines and spirits, jewellery, cameras, optical, shoe repairs and carpets. Whilst well known names operated concessions within the store (e.g. Boots operated the pharmaceutical and toiletries concessions, and Dixons the camera concession), the store was presented to the shopper as a single operation:

Commercially GEM operate by letting separate concessions within the building but the licensees remain anonymous to the shopper. (Beazley, 1966, p. 333, footnote)

According to *The Sunday Times*:

The G E M method of selling is to provide the building and facilities, and contract with retailers to operate departments within it. Licensees trade anonymously under G E M merchandising methods. They pay G E M anything from 2 to 10 per cent on turnover.⁸

The notion that the store was a department store was reflected in news coverage too: 'Britain's newest department store, which has more than 50 departments on one floor, will be opened today',⁹ albeit that report appeared under a less-than-consistent headline: 'Bargains mark 50-shop store opening'. GEM relied exclusively on concessionaires operating within the overall GEM proposition, and thus did not fit the conventional department store model. Nor did confusion end there, with the store being variously described as:

- 'a £2,000,000 out-of-town shopping centre project' (*Evening Post and News*, 4 May 1964);
- 'a big American-style supermarket' (*Evening Post and News*, 14 May 1964);
- 'a complete department store and more' (*Guardian Journal*, 7 November 1964);
- 'a new American style supercentre' (*Guardian Journal*, 9 November 1964);

- ‘new-style shopping plaza’ (*Guardian Journal*, 10 November 1964);
- ‘Superstore’ (*Evening Post and News*, 9 November 1964).

Confusion also surrounded GEM’s pricing. Several sources refer to GEM as a discount store, reflecting its position in US retailing, but many initial GEM concessionaires did not practise discounting, pricing goods exactly as in their other stores in traditional locations. The removal of Resale Price Maintenance from most areas of retailing in 1964 meant true British discounting was still in its infancy, with the trade press more concerned with trading stamps, which were not offered at GEM.

GEM, then, challenged contemporary concepts of retail formats, pre-dating attempts to formalise definitions of large stores. The *Architects’ Journal* offered perhaps the best definition: ‘the supercentre, a shop of department store proportions, on the supermarket principle of retailing where all the family’s needs are catered for’.¹⁰

GEM’s Manager of Development, Architecture, and Operations described the store’s initial offer: ‘With all the facilities we offer him, free parking, petrol, accessories and tyre service, you could call this the motorist’s shopping centre’, adding ‘Not at the expense of his wife and children. We would like to think we cater for all the family’ and stressing the hairdressing salon and ‘pram park’. Whilst offering the lowest priced petrol in the county, it was noted that ‘GEM do not give trading stamps. Their aim is a quick turnover achieved by a large and satisfied customer rate’.¹¹ Stores at Leeds and Bournemouth were to follow with further expansion foreseen.

GEM Opens in West Bridgford ...

On GEM’s opening day, West Bridgford ‘faced one of its biggest traffic crises ... when its roads were held in the grips of a jam causing widespread traffic dislocation’ amid ‘chaotic conditions, which existed all afternoon’.¹² The store closed several times to clear the ‘mass of shoppers’ in the food hall through the ‘pay-out counters’, and a ‘conservative estimate’ numbered first-day visitors at 30,000. The 1,000-space car park had been full and parking spilt over into nearby residential streets, promoting complaints from residents. It was estimated that around 5,000 vehicles were in the area at the busiest time. A GEM executive described the customer response as ‘overwhelming’.¹³

After that first day, the *Evening Post and News*¹⁴ assessed initial impacts on ‘The Parade’, a small row of shops opposite the entrance to GEM, reporting these traders had not lost business as feared. Three traders, a grocer, butcher and chemist, reported increased trade, although traffic and parking were seen as threatening future trade.

However, the hardware retailer detected no difference in trade, and doubted many of Saturday’s visitors would return. Further, it was reported that the National Union of Small Shopkeepers was seeking discussions with various authorities. An announcement, reported in the same article, that waiting times for on-street parking in the city centre were to be extended suggests fears of wider negative impacts were present from the outset.

Plans to ease problems the next Saturday followed: additional parking was allocated,¹⁵ extra traffic police would be on duty, and GEM hired four policemen to organise on-site parking.¹⁶ Although the conditions of that opening day did not reoccur, nonetheless, there was clearly vast public interest in this novel form of retailing.

Early Impressions of GEM

Just after GEM opened, a local magazine carried a feature on the ‘Gem giant’ which predicted ‘a period of adjustment’. That article perceptively anticipated many issues and disputes which characterised the debate on out-of-town retailing in ensuing decades. According to the article (*Nottingham Topic*, 1964):

- It was too early to judge impact.
- ‘.. if the unusual exterior, with its complete absence of windows, is something to shock our smaller-scale senses’, the interior was noteworthy: ‘Bright strip-lighting set in the largest unbroken ceiling in the country, illuminates what would otherwise be a seemingly endless black cavern’.
- More than 50 ‘departments’ ‘include everything from diamonds to diapers, mothballs to motor accessories’.
- Few concessionaires were local companies. Each – bar one professional practice – had ‘submerged its identity into the GEM scheme of things’; most were ‘nationally-known companies with the financial resources necessary to participate in a project which is completely revolutionary’.
- The aim was to convince the British to shop under one roof at one time, through what the General Manager of Merchandise called a ‘fun deal’, including free parking spaces, cheap petrol, and promotions: ‘Within minutes of parking the car the family will find so much to see and do. While mother is having her hair styled in our superb salon, father and the children will be browsing around the multitude of departments ranging from toys to automobile accessories or having a snack in the restaurant’.
- Extended opening was another innovation in 1964: from 10.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. on Mondays, Tuesdays, and Saturdays, and until 8.00 p.m. on Thursday and Friday evenings. Statutorily-enforced half-day closing was maintained on Wednesdays, however, notwithstanding attempts by GEM to modify this. Sunday shopping was still decades away. The *Topic* noted that ‘This sort of thinking makes sense in an age when the percentage of working wives is high’.
- More general arguments to follow were anticipated: ‘Outside the city boundaries in West Bridgford, it attracts people away from the already hopelessly overcrowded city centre. It is significant that since its opening the store has had a beneficial, rather than adverse effect on the trade enjoyed by other shops in the area, and those on The Parade in particular. The next few months will constitute a period of adjustment. Nottingham shoppers and those who come from further afield – as they must if the project is to succeed – must reconcile themselves to a way of shopping hitherto quite foreign to them. The concessionaires must adapt their sales approach to fit into a completely new environment; and GEM Supercentres Ltd. must modify

a completely American concept to the rather more conservative taste of shoppers in this country’.

In conclusion, questions were posed: about consistency and quality control, about the breadth of the appeal across income groups, about the centre’s evolution and if local companies might seek entry, about local congestion, and the durability of the ‘fun deal’.

Some four decades on, there are familiar and persistent echoes in this depiction of the arrival of out-of-town retailing in the United Kingdom. We are also reminded of changes that have revolutionised British retailing since, in areas such as building design and opening hours. In particular, we may reflect on the evolution and adaptation that occurred, locally and nationally, to the original supercentre concept.

A Professional Impression

In spring 1965, the *Architects’ Journal* appraised the GEM store stressing its American antecedence:

In many spheres of social and business life the American pattern is being followed in Great Britain. Our standards of life, technology and economy are in certain fields a decade behind the American counterpart so that we have the advantage of being able to see the mistakes made and the possibility of rectifying them in the early stages. In the business of retailing the pattern is being closely followed ... (*Architects’ Journal*, 1965, p. 1072)

The spread of self-service retailing, rising car and refrigerator usage, and packaging and preservation developments were seen as promoting family-based one-stop shopping.

The *Journal* anticipated future trends: ‘As virtually all the stock is on display it becomes in effect a retail warehouse’ (p. 1072), while community involvement of local groups were ‘of course good business’. We learn that GEM’s ‘research and statistics, which are undertaken in great detail, not only determine the broad issues of general location and capacity but also the most desirable layout on the sales floor to promote sales. The grocery supermarket area is always placed furthest from the entrance doors, thus forcing customers to walk right through the store’ (p. 1073).

GEM stores had initially been proposed at Leeds and Bournemouth, but planning delays meant the West Bridgford store was developed first, taking just nine months from outline planning approval to completion. Planners were cautioned not to ‘stick their heads in the sand until they are forced to give a decision’, so leaving the Minister to make a hurried decision on limited evidence, but to develop policies anticipating store developments.

The West Bridgford site was seen as having drawbacks. Access from the City of Nottingham was constrained through limited capacity to cross the River Trent, pending completion of a bypass, although the catchment to the south was extensive, with claims of customers coming from as far as Hertfordshire! In ‘GEM’s terminology’, the site was ‘60 per cent potential’. Planning conditions to aid walk-in access required a walkway from the road to the main entrance. The underground

conditions of a former refuse tip with difficult drainage resulted in detailed siting being largely predetermined, requiring difficult access arrangements whereby 'site circulation is very much of a compromise', leading to a paradox:

The very principle of siting a store such as this out of town is to ease vehicular access: unfortunately the site layout does not comply with this principle. (p. 1074)

Thus, spatially, the GEM development clearly had intrinsic limitations.

Architectural design also generated concerns:

Although one must regard this as a new building type, the passer-by is immediately struck by its industrial looking character, perhaps promoted by the size and shape of the building and the materials used. ... One wonders how much potential business is lost by the character of the building. The lack of interest that would encourage the passer-by to explore, the lack of goods on display in large windows. This is what the passer by expects of a shop, an invitation to stop and stare without obligation or even entering the premises. (p. 1074)

The detailed design, notwithstanding overall the artificially ventilated, heated and lit space was 'accomplished in a crisp style', also prompted concern as lack of variation in ceiling height, intended to maximise flexibility, denied a sense of enclosure within departments whilst the lack of a common house style was 'jarring'. Consequently the 'customer, far from being an individual cosseted and wooed into purchase by attentive sales staff, is part of a mass of people bustled into impulse buying' (p. 1075).

Fundamentally the building form and novelty of the store were questioned:

Instead of 'departmental store' being the building type, the architects reassessed this as a windowless industrial premises for sales and service of merchandise: the flow pattern of shopping movement is considered to the same degree as machine layout in a factory. (p. 1076)

Of course, this style would characterise much new shopping provision in decades to follow, both in supermarkets and shopping centres, regardless of whether in-town, out-of-town, or somewhere between. At the heart of architectural concern here is a sea change in terms of the design and orientation of shopping provision; a break with the tradition of a shops looking outward onto busy High Streets, to an inward looking structure of industrial character in a non-traditional location reliant primarily on car access. GEM was, then, the shape of stores to come!

GEM in Retreat

GEM faced problems from its earliest days of trading in the UK. Prominent concessionaires, notably Boots and Dixons, withdrew early,¹⁷ with the store

apparently under-performing within 15 weeks of opening.¹⁸ Both GEM stores – in Nottingham and Leeds – fell short of expectations. Rumours either of a sale or a link with a British retailer persisted into the summer of 1966.¹⁹ William Bartfield had developed an apparently successful discount store, under the name ‘Fame’, in Preston²⁰ as well as a membership store in Manchester and a second Fame outlet in Lytham. To commentators, this represented a lifeline for GEM:

It could be that the two Gem operations which are currently in the UK lack that ‘something’ from the English retailing scene which should come from a link with Fame.²¹

However these were difficult trading times, and by late summer that proposed alliance had been shelved ‘in view of the current economic situation in the UK’.²² What eventually transpired, of course, was the purchase of 80 percent of the GEM operation by ASDA later that year,²³ not an acquisition of, or merger with, British retailing acumen, but more a withdrawal.

Architectural reservations had, as shown above, been expressed about aspects of site layout and store design. Once ASDA took control of the store, these problems started to be resolved, although that took some time. The main entrance was relocated from the ‘short side’ of the store to a more conventional position on the longer façade²⁴ (formerly a ‘minor entrance’), which allowed improved site circulation with segregated customer and service movements. Departments were relocated internally, the community room taken into business use, and eventually a house style established. It might be noted that the community room and pedestrian access requirements had been imposed as planning conditions, suggesting some shift in the relationship between store operators and local authority occurred. ASDA were able to adapt with greater flexibility than GEM had managed, although one can only surmise about reasons behind this: were the British company’s relations with the local authority better? Were they less tied to a GEM-style model? Was the local authority worried about another failure on the site? Was ASDA less pressured to deliver quick results? Did ASDA understand the British planning system better than GEM? Or did the successful ASDA discount food offer the underlying key to prosperity and thus progress?

Certainly ASDA delivered greater trading efficiency. Seth and Randall (1999) describe a visit in 1965 by ASDA management to the West Bridgford store:

When the Asda trio visited the store, they saw ‘at least as many staff as customers’. Grocery takings were a measly £6,000 a week. Stockdale asked Asquith his opinion.

‘I think we can make a go of this’, he replied.

‘How much could you take in a week, then?’

‘£25,000’. (p. 77)

Later we learn that ASDA took £30,000 in its first week at West Bridgford, so the clear message has to be that GEM and its concessionaires had failed to unleash the potential of its store.

Local Impacts

Limited sources on retail occupancy in West Bridgford since the last commercial directory of 1956 (Kelly's, 1956) make detailed impact assessment difficult. The Parade of small shops opposite the GEM/ASDA site would be a prime candidate for direct impact, notwithstanding very early talk of increased trading. Here, in 1956, were 10 retail outlets, which, notwithstanding changes of name or ownership, mostly survived beyond the opening of GEM. By the early 1970s, based on personal interviews, four of the 1956 outlets had closed (hardware shop, draper, grocer, small supermarket) to be replaced by a DIY/garden shop, a second hand car dealer, and two service uses (betting shop, launderette). However, the closure of the supermarket occurred in the late 1950s, reflecting local restructuring by Nottingham Co-operative Society, with premises being occupied by a second hand car dealer continuously over several decades. The shift to service uses has continued, with an insurance broker and two hot food take-aways replacing former retail uses (food shops, DIY/garden) by 2002, and such diversification continuing since. Two units (chemist, CTN) have remained in the same functions since the 1950s. Of course, these changes reflect general shifts in British retailing, but given the almost unbroken occupancy of units, and some physical extensions, the most serious implication that might be drawn of the effect of GEM/ASDA on this cluster of retail premises is that there has been a shift to service trades. From exclusively retail occupancy at GEM's opening, two service uses appeared by the early 1970s, and by the late 1990s the number of service uses had increased to four, with two additional units in service occupancy added.

More detailed records exist for West Bridgford town centre. This 'minor district centre' with a little under 50,000 square foot retail floorspace (Hearn and Partners, 1988) is just over one mile (1.6 km) from the GEM/ASDA site. The centre remained prosperous through the 1960s and 1970s, up to the present. Since GEM opened, the centre has seen periodic renewal and rebuilding of elements, considerable infilling, and marked peripheral expansion, both newly built and converted. In the late 1980s, Greater Nottingham Co-operative Society relocated from a supermarket to a more peripherally located 21,300 square foot store with over 100 car parking places. In 2004, Marks and Spencer's have gained outline permission to convert a public house to a food store.

Using Kelly's directory and Goad plans, changes in the core of the centre as surveyed by Goad since 1973 are measurable. Table 1 shows food retailing maintaining a remarkably consistent presence throughout the period, and no significant change can be defined either side of the opening of GEM in 1964. Other retail sectors have expanded with the growth and redevelopment of the centre. Personal services remain relatively stable in numbers, but major growth has occurred in financial and professional services. The apparent rise in vacancies in 1983 demands caution, and certainly is not directly attributable to ASDA, as five of these six vacancies were new units, three with nominated tenants, on the site of a former garage. Thus, again, it is difficult to argue a major negative impact resulting from superstore competition. It seems that the growth of West Bridgford's catchment, and its continuing prosperity, allowed local shopping and services to prosper and diversify alongside the superstore,

Table 1. Commercial uses in West Bridgford Town Centre, 1956–1993

Use	1956	1973	1983	1993
Food & drink retail	10	10	10	10
Clothing, drapery	5	5	6	7
Other retail	8	15	12	16
Banks, building societies	2	3	8	8
Personal services ^a	5	7	6	6
Professional services ^b	0	5	7	9
Garages	2	2	1	0
Cafes, restaurants	2	3	2	2
Cinema	1	0	0	0
Vacant	0	3	6	0

a = e.g. hairdressers, shoe repairs, dry cleaners, travel agents.

b = e.g. estate agents, solicitors, architect.

unaffected by several refurbishments to the ASDA store. An entirely new ASDA store with 10,000 square feet of additional floorspace replaced the original GEM store in the late 1990s, and now the ASDA superstore is but one of the several such competitors (e.g. Safeway/Morrison, Sainsbury, Tesco) for local shopping in the West Bridgford catchment, with Marks & Spencer soon to join them.

Concluding Observations

What is GEM's significance in the evolution of British retailing? Against the model of 'waves' of retail decentralisation (Hallsworth, 1994; Fernie, 1995, 1998), it is, mixing metaphors, something of an outlier. For Schiller (1986), the first wave was dominated by food, led by supermarkets, and occurred in the 1970s. GEM reflects none of these characteristics, being substantially non-food, owned by an American discount chain, and occurring in the mid-1960s.

GEM's influence as an innovative force in British retailing was brief. Although ASDA traded under the GEM fascia at West Bridgford for several years, GEM itself traded for little over two years. Thus it would seem the GEM experiment failed, a view taken by many subsequently.

The movement away from town centres can be traced as far back as the Gem stores of the mid-1960s. From that modest and none too successful beginning, decentralisation has grown. (McFadyen, 1987, p. 64)

But, given a rising interest in retail failures (Burt *et al.*, 2003), we must ask why it failed. A widely held view saw the core problem as the concession system:

Occupying 'GEM discount stores, which were being vacated by the American company after a rather disastrous few years', Asda dropped 'the concessionaire system which the GEM stores had been unsuccessfully using'. (*Retail & Distribution Management*, 1974, p. 30)

A report from 1971 also identified concessions as a core problem, in terms of landlord–tenant relationships:

There has been controversy over the best ways of managing such superstores: unified control and sub-contracting to licensees both have their protagonists abroad. It is not our purpose to comment on the relationship between operator and the licensee, although this can be critical, as was shown in the history of ‘GEM’. (NEDO/Distributive Trades EDC, 1971, p. 62)

Similarly Thorncroft (1973) suggested:

The experience of GEM, the first superstore operator in this country in the mid 1960s, was not particularly happy and Asda, which has taken over the GEM stores at West Bridgford (*sic*) and Crossgates (*sic*), Leeds, franchise only off licence and tobacco sales. (pp. 94–96)

Notably consistency across ‘departments’ was lacking, as early commentators had anticipated:

The floorspace in the stores was franchised to various retailers, and there was no consistent image or standard of quality to the goods being sold. The level of turnover in each store was consequently very low. (Neafcy, 1984, p. 104)

So the consensus is that it was the *modus operandi* of relying on concessions that was GEM’s basic weakness, with ASDA’s rapid retreat from such a system and subsequent immediate progress seeming to support that.

Personal interviews have added detail on the GEM experience. One pensioner, living very close to the site, suggested while many came to visit in the early period of trading, few actually bought much, underlining the idea of novelty. A retired university lecturer, recalling GEM in operation, offered insights. First, shoppers paid separately at each concession, which, being time consuming and inconvenient, undermined the purported notion of one-stop shopping. There were also security implications. Concessions were delimited on the floor, and if (unknowingly) a shopper took goods ‘across the line’ into another concession, they might be challenged and even apparently accused of shoplifting. Further, concessionaires sold goods at the same prices as in conventional outlets. Thus, taking Boots, for example, there would be no price saving such as became expected from out-of-town shopping; the same goods could be bought for the same prices in West Bridgford town or Nottingham city centres. Moreover, Boots faced the disincentive of selling the same items for less margin, given GEM’s overhead, than in their own store a mile or so distant.

There were, however, problems other than the concession system. *The Grocer*²⁵ commented at the time of ASDA’s purchase of GEM that expansion had been thwarted by the slowness of the planning system and problems of site acquisition. A more extensive store chain might have raised GEM’s profile, brought scale economies, and created a stronger image. British retailing in 1964 was turbulent, with Resale Price Maintenance being dismantled, yet still a concern for would-be

discounters. Rising inflation undermined price comparisons and thus the discounters' message. Then there were difficulties arising from the government's 'economic squeeze'. *The Grocer* in 1964–1966 was dominated by discussions of the effectiveness of various trading stamps, suggesting consumers were being lured by other than straight price or convenience comparisons. Add to this rapid expansion by supermarkets such as Tesco, and a picture of a very challenging retail environment emerges. The timing, then, both in the context of the evolution of British retailing and shorter term economic cycles, was not to GEM's advantage.

Requirements for one-stop shopping to flourish were only just emerging. Car ownership was continuing to rise, but as some of the comments above (which now carry a markedly sexist tone) imply, most drivers were male; female car use was still constrained by limited daytime car access and lower female levels of licence holding. The technologies that underpin scanning and EPOS systems, with which the concessionary system could have become customer friendly with centralised tills, were still years away. The regulatory environment was also struggling to come to terms with new pressures: abolition of Resale Price Maintenance was a slow and tortuous process, and while the shift to longer trading hours was beginning, GEM still failed to gain exemption from half-day closing from the local council.

Thus the picture emerges of a company with less than optimal retail systems seeking to gain a foothold in a turbulent and in many ways hostile retail environment. In that light, perhaps the 'failure' of GEM was inevitable, but it was also something of a Trojan Horse in two respects. First, under ASDA the West Bridgford store came to show that such stores could be built and operated away from traditional centres in Britain without necessarily devastating local shopping provision. Second, GEM's demise offered the shell from which ASDA would develop and prosper. ASDA was to pioneer what became the preferred format for early out-of-town shopping in Britain, namely, the superstore (Jones, 1981; Schiller, 1986). Thus the GEM stores played a crucial role in the subsequent development of modern British retailing.

Notes

- ¹ <http://www.wtv-zone.com/dpjohnson/60sdiscountstores/>
- ² Nottingham *Evening Post*, 2 April 1963: 1.
- ³ '... and at the inquiry', *The Grocer*, 16 February 1963: 38; 'Gem store inquiry', *The Grocer*, 22 February 1963: 80.
- ⁴ 'Jim Kalal kills "Gem for Sale" rumours', *The Grocer*, 13 November 1965: 24.
- ⁵ 'Not all plain sailing for Gem', *The Grocer*, 13 November 1965: 34.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ Advertisement in Nottingham *Evening Post and News*, 6 November 1964: 21.
- ⁸ 'GEM swings to discount policy', *Sunday Times*, 12 September 1965.
- ⁹ Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 7 November 1964.
- ¹⁰ *Architects' Journal* (1965, p. 1072).
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 9 November 1964.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ 10 November 1964.
- ¹⁵ Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 10 November 1964.
- ¹⁶ Nottingham *Guardian Journal*, 14 November 1964.
- ¹⁷ 'Boots and Dixons to give up Gem concessions', *The Grocer*, 13 February 1965: 19.

- ¹⁸ 'Gem "not disappointed with turnover"', *The Grocer*, 20 February 1965: 34.
- ¹⁹ 'Fame to operate in Gem superstores', *The Grocer*, 25 June 1966: 23.
- ²⁰ Interestingly, Jones (1969, pp. 5, 6) presents photographs of the Preston store with GEM logo and 'before its takeover and modernisation by the Gem organisation', but more details of such a link have not been discovered yet.
- ²¹ *The Grocer*, 25 June 1966: 23.
- ²² 'Fame/Gem deal shelved', *The Grocer*, 3 September 1966: 32.
- ²³ 'Gem sells out to Asda', *The Grocer*, 19 November 1966: 33; 'Asda's 80 percent slice of Gem', *The Grocer*, 26 November 1966: 33.
- ²⁴ *Architects' Journal* (1965, p. 1074) did comment that the entrance on the short façade was 'contrary to the usual practice of placing it on the long façade considered by GEM to be the most desirable position for good internal layout'.
- ²⁵ 'Gem sells out to Asda', *The Grocer*, 19 November 1966: 33.

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