

Putting markets on the map

George Nicholson gives his views on what needs to be done to put markets on the map in London.

George Nicholson has been one of the leading figures in the revival of the Borough Market and is the creator of The National Retail Planning Forum.

With the Borough Market winning the *Evening Standard's* "London's best shopping experience" award last month, and also being one of the capital's top visitor attractions, the turn around in London's oldest fruit and vegetable market is there for all to see. But what of the picture in other UK markets, and those in London in particular?

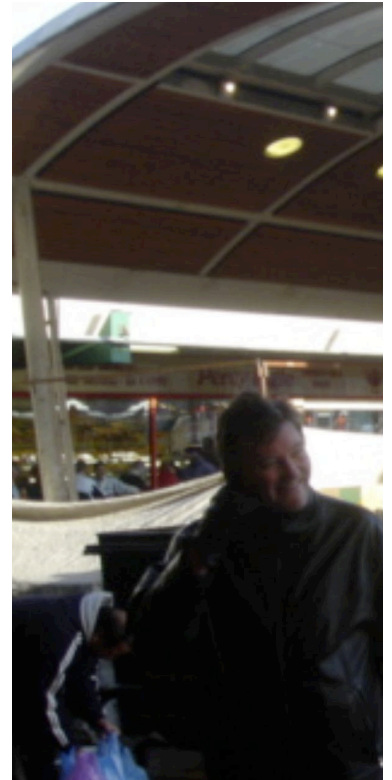
Anyone visiting Borough Market in 1997 would have been confronted with a pretty depressing picture. What had once been a busy and thriving wholesale market, was rapidly running out of cash. The four acre site, then largely vacant was the home to at maximum 15 traders, meaning the annual turnover of the 250 year old trust was down below £400,000 - and falling. Market structures and services, long starved of investment - whilst ideal for a film set - were starting to fall apart and becoming increasingly un-useable. To complete the picture of despair, new regulations on health and hygiene meant that the market was put on notice by the local authority - Southwark - that it was living on borrowed time.

Contrast that with today's

picture, with over 150 businesses comprising wholesale and retail stands - permanent and casual, numerous food retail outlets and a range of restaurants - all trading within a newly refurbished market. With an income now approaching £2.5 million, this means that the market's future is considerably brighter, even allowing for the prospect of construction work on a new railway viaduct commencing in January 2009. It is not the intention of this article to detail that remarkable journey - no-one to my knowledge has built a market from virtually nothing at the same time as completely refurbishing it. And having done it, I wouldn't encourage anyone else to try. But the fact that Borough Market exists, does mean that there is a positive platform on which to start to contemplate the wider matter of the future of markets in the UK.

What role do markets play?

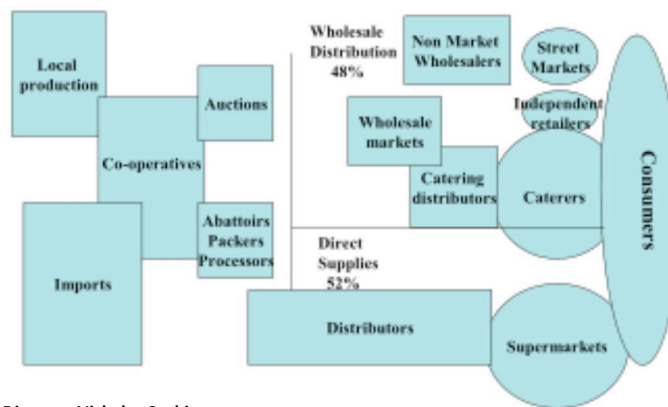
It wasn't until 2005 that the first national survey of markets in the UK was undertaken by the National Association of British Market Authorities (Nabma). Not that



markets are the only part of the retail industry short on data. The last national census of retail distribution was undertaken in 1971. A casualty of Nicholas Ridley's "bonfire of controls", the planned update in the 80s was cancelled, leaving a statistical vacuum, something that has been the subject a three year ESRC research project, the findings of which were presented to the recent NRPF/LGA review of retail planning (see www.nrpf.org). To this day, retail statistics remain a weakness in the policy arsenal, despite recent attempts by government to improve matters. The fact remains that although floorspace and employment figures are now collected, there is still no agreed basis for collecting national turnover statistics.

The Nabma survey revealed a mixed picture. On the one hand,

The Food Chain



Diagram; Nicholas Saphir

This article is based on the author's presentation to the National Food Markets Conference in November 2007.



with 1100 operating markets and 46,000 traders, the survey revealed a pretty robust market scene in the UK, something that included an increase in the number of market stalls available every week. On the other hand, the number of vacant stalls in markets showed a slight increase. Overall, the turnover was estimated at over £1.1 billion, (a figure that in the markets industry is felt to be an underestimate). Set alongside the totals for the retail industry of £236 billion turnover and 3 million jobs, this shows the markets industry to be a "niche sector", but never-the-less an important one.

Recently the Greater London Authority (GLA) has started to fill the gaps in knowledge in London by embarking on a project collecting data on London markets. An earlier report by the LDA looked at wholesale markets in London, but it was based more on London's future needs for industrial land than a proper review of markets. The



London Food Commission equally, have strayed into the territory, coming up with the curious notion of a "Food Hub" - which to those inside the industry looked uncannily like a market. The GLA report is due out in the new year, something which it is hoped will start a process of discussion in the Capital about the role and importance of Markets. Even before the report is published, it is possible to predict some of the likely findings.

First and foremost amongst them will undoubtedly be the different arrangements for managing, or - more correctly - not managing markets. Long gone are the days when markets had their own committee or dedicated management structures, a picture that is reflected nationally. With the exception of the City of London, which manages Spitalfields, Smithfield and Billingsgate markets as well as Leadenhall, few if any local authorities manage, invest in and plan for the future of their markets. If there is management it is usually seen as a "policing" function rather than a creative one. More often, the picture is one of neglect, although recent initiatives by Islington at Whitecross Street, just north of the Barbican, show what can be achieved. Unlike the rest of the UK, London's markets are mostly street markets, something that demands if anything even more input if they are to both succeed and manage the inevitable conflicts that arise regarding; traffic, contraband, waste and congestion.

Perhaps there really is a lesson to be learned from Borough Market with its Board of Trustees, dedicated staff, and the long term commitment that flows from its founding statutes. 2008 should see the start in London of a long overdue discussion.

Putting Markets on the retail map

Markets like secondary shopping have long been seen, if they are seen

at all, as on the periphery of the retail offer. In fact until the National Retail Planning Forum (NRPF) produced a report on secondary shopping in 2004, there had never been a national focus on the topic. Markets similarly have operated in a bit of a policy vacuum, although PPS6 for the first time did have a paragraph stressing their importance. Yet despite the widely accepted myth of "Clone Towns", 50 per cent of shops in the UK remain in independent hands (see *Andrew Smith; NRPF review of retail 2007*). Independent retailers and markets are a vital part of the retail offer in many towns and cities in the UK, and they deserve more attention.

In part, it is a problem of the people who work in markets not seeing themselves as a part of the wider retail offer. But to most people - even in retailing - markets are a hidden world operating outside the normal retail networks. There are signs from within the industry that this is about to change. The recent National Food Markets conference in London, was a unique event, that brought together; retailers, property developers, market authorities, local authorities, the food and farming industry, and commentators under one roof. It is a sign of things to come, because as the Retail Property Directors conference, staged by Retail Week heard last year, there is a new focus on "The Shopping Experience". This is because the internet is now offering a choice that means we don't any longer have to shop for our basic needs. In this situation, shopping centres have to offer something more to entice people out of their homes. Of course, the authentic experience is something traditional markets have traded off for years, and it puts them in a potentially strong position in the emerging new retail world.

The other reason that interests

are converging, is that we are entering the "post Arndale" era where many of the town centres re-developed in the 70s are coming up for renewal. Some architects feel we have already entered a "New Arndale" era, judging by some of the schemes that are currently being built, but there undoubtedly exists an opportunity for local authorities to assist their markets this time around, often now being housed in completely inappropriate spaces often at first floor level or tucked away at the rear of a shopping centre where no-one can see them. As was pointed out at the National Food Markets conference by Robin Butler from Lend Lease, the era when shopping centres deliberately did not have a food offer - Bluewater being the high water mark - is now over, and the food offer is now being seen as an "Anchor" in its own right. The new food hall in John Lewis in Oxford Street is a result of this new focus, and we can expect others to follow, as retailers and developers explore the art of creating "shopping places". There is no doubt about the combined effects of Borough Market both as a food attraction and for the

effect on property values, as a glance at the property pages will confirm.

This is a fascinating time to be involved in the markets world. For the first time in the 30 years I have been a trustee of Borough Market, I can see that markets are emerging as a key ingredient in any new retail offer worth its salt. Not only that, but their potential roles in supporting independent food producers; offering an alternative supply chain, in promoting the regional food economy, the importance of the environmental and healthy eating agendas and the need to challenge the growing dominance of the supermarkets, all point to a revival in markets fortunes.

Borough Market today - where next? That is a secret - but not for long!

Images on previous page: Queens Market, Newham; Broadway Market, Liverpool.

