

BIRMINGHAM MARKETS

Central Birmingham boasts three permanent traditional retail markets as well as the UK's biggest wholesale market. The city centre has been subject to ongoing regeneration and expansion of chain retail outlets, culminating in the opening of the expanded and reformed Bullring shopping centre in 2003. The three traditional retail markets (the Rag Market, the Indoor Market and the Open (outdoor) Market) have been pushed south by the expansion of private retail space from the 1960s to the present. The Rag Market was redeveloped in 2000. The 1960s Indoor Market was demolished and rebuilt by Hammerson, the international retail developer which also built and manages the Bullring Shopping Centre. The new Indoor Market opened in 2003.

This area of the city has traditionally encompassed the markets, the Chinese Quarter, the gay quarter and the working-class industrial area of Digbeth, with the bus stops making it an easy place to get to from all over Birmingham. But the regeneration of the area has included depriving the market of transport links. According to traders, Birmingham is increasingly a city geared to shoppers in cars going to the shopping centre, rather than the many buses which used to come right up to and depart from the market. In the last decade or so, the 'Southern Gateway enterprise zone', as it has been named, has been undergoing rapid change, the largest of which is the imminent closure and re-location of the Wholesale Market by 2017.

In March 2015 a fuller outline plan for the Wholesale site, named the Birmingham Smithfield development, was announced. The 500m development, one of the biggest ever city centre regeneration schemes, will involve a new retail area, tram link (in preparation for new High Speed 2 station nearby in 2026), offices and 1000 homes. The Wholesale Market is to be relocated four miles outside the city centre, with unpredictable impacts on both wholesale and retail markets.

There are over 600 businesses in the three markets, and each market has its own trader committee, of which one— **Friends of Bullring Markets** — has challenged and opposed many actions by Birmingham City Council and Developers. Traditional markets have a surprisingly high turnover of produce; as one trader puts it, 'I will sell more on a Saturday than Sainsbury's'. But the business model is different — the profit margins are very low, and traders are in competition with each other. Recently, Birmingham City Council estimated that the markets lose £800,000 a year. Traders discovered that this was based on an abstract 'asset identification value' for the site rather than real rental figures. Traders also suggest that the market site was undervalued (at £1.47m) but when traders put in a bid to buy it themselves, the figures were changed. Anecdotally, Birmingham market customers are very different from the ones attracted to the shopping centre — they tend to be older, more working-class and represent more of the ethnic diversity of the citizens of Birmingham. As one trader puts it: 'The rich can buy anywhere. This is a city of working-class and we're here

for them'. This would support research conducted on other traditional retail markets in the UK. Takings in the market are down; according to traders, this is because poor design and planning, poor management and reduced transport links disincentivise and block customers from using them.

The new Indoor Market in particular has suffered a multitude of problems, including poor drainage, badly-constructed counters and fittings and poor lighting (some traders have had to pay for and install their own lighting so that they can work properly). In 2013, Birmingham City Council said it would keep outdoor markets where they were and make improvements. Some improvements have been made. However, some traders have been unsatisfied with the work done and again have had to organise and pay for their own improvements.

As traders have discovered, it is not easy to find out who controls the city and how far their power extends. The developer, Hammerson, owns the Indoor Market. Hammerson get first option on building on the indoor and Rag Market and the land around it. This means central Birmingham is 'locked in' to a particular form of private development, as publicly-owned and managed retail space shrinks. As well as the removal of the bus stops, the planning and design of the new shopping centre has hindered trading. There is a physical block to people accessing markets from Bullring – the poorly-designed steps and fountain and the 'buffer zone' of Edgbaston Street, where Hammerson stipulated that there could be no outdoor trading next to the Rag Market. In the end traders just moved out there anyway.

Friends of Bullring Market and their supporters have had small victories for the markets, often by using the threat of legal action (usually judicial review) to force concessions from the council. However, the wholesale and retail traders lack common cause, in that their business models and trading hours are different. Retail traders in the Open Market rely on Wholesale traders to purchase and help them move produce easily. The relocation of the Wholesale Market will be challenging for many of these small businesses.

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