

Don't Rain On My Parade

By Jeff Probst

It's Priory this and Priory that, a workaday parade, trendy only in the sense that the jumble of shop signs proclaim we have 'cuisine', not just food, a 'taverna' for a restaurant, and a 'gentlemen's hairstylist', not a barbers. The pink and orange shopfronts jump out at you, but there is a solidity, a handsomeness even, in the first-floor facade of white window sills and surrounds. It's one of the few intact Edwardian parades in north London, part of the nineteenth-century Warner estate, developed in this area for housing and commercial property and still largely owned by the Warner family.

Many of today's proprietors rent the flat above their premises. Leases were renegotiated last year and, though there are three empty shops, there seems to be more of a feeling of settledness. And cleanliness: the paving outside the shops is newish; the street sweepers are around more often; there doesn't seem to be much new graffiti; and I haven't seen a broken shop window for a while.

The parade is 30 cheek-by-jowl businesses bookended by a minuscule antique shop that's been here since 1971 and a café, the Marie Celeste of the parade, whose Opening Soon sign hasn't changed for years. The anchor in the middle is the watch and clock repairs, the smallest and oldest shop, where Umberto always has that battery you need and can fix any fixable watch. He's the third watchmaker's on the site. The proprietors include Turks, French, Chinese, Greeks, Kurds, Indians, Sri Lankans, Cypriots, Moroccans, Tunisians, Italians, Welsh and even English. We have much of what we need.

I avoid the betting agency and the smoky Irish pub of serious drinkers. Some residents, to avoid the shopkeepers obsessively keen to talk, detour round the back of the parade, running the gauntlet of rubbish, beer kegs and 50 MGs in varied states of repair, so as not to be corralled into yet another conversation.

I'm a regular at one of the two barbers, the 'hair salon'. As far as I can tell, Andre doesn't seem to have raised his prices in eight years nor mind if I fall asleep as my hair is being cut. He knows that, for me, barber conversation is an effort, camouflaging the rapture

My local shopping parade is at the foot of Muswell Hill, at Park and Priory Roads. Like every other shopping parade in N8, ours has its own character, somewhere between – as it is geographically – the scruffy nonchalance of central Crouch End and the posh pretension of Muswell Hill.



of soft steel and electric air on my goosepimple nape.

Ellie, the Chinese takeaway lady, knows my 'usual' when I phone it through. Her prices have gone up but chopsticking down her Prawns in Yellow Bean Sauce with Cashews is something I'd cross the road for. Vinay, the soft-spoken pharmacist, is almost a neighbourhood doctor, offering gentle advice to one and all. It's his first business, though there has been a chemist on the same site for 60 years; and while some of the shopowners speak of closing in the near future, Vinay has thoughts of expanding his practice to include homeopathic consulting rooms upstairs.

Over the years, we've lost useful shops like the butcher's and the cobbler's, and passing trade was further reduced by last year's departure of the bank and post office, both of which had also helped to make everyday life easier for many locals. And there are more steel shutters than before; there has been an increase in thefts. Shoplifters walk in through back doors and snatch mobiles and money, or come in as supposed customers and shove sweets and drinks up their sleeves.

But the parade has been boosted by the people the new Sunday farmers market brings to the area and by thriving new businesses like the flower shop and the art school and the now firmly established organic food shop, boasting the parade's best window displays.

Some proprietors, like Anil the Telly Shop man, have slowed their professional pace to our local speed. He was with Thorn-EMI, in the engineering department; now he gets job satisfaction from the 'personal service' he provides,

fixing our TVs and videos, especially in the winter when, he says, 'there's more business. People watch more TV, and the failure rate increases'. Mehmet at the corner shop tells me they used to be in the rag trade in Hackney before they decided to plant themselves, almost on the corner, here.

When the giant Tesco began to open on Sundays some years ago, it affected the food shops, but

the patisserie and bakery's best-sellers continue to be their weekend no chemical, no preservative, croissants, even though they taste cakey. Their Friday challah is worth the wait; though – oddly for a bakery – some of their bread lacks taste or has a cardboard crust. But it almost always sells out, and that's partly due to the friendliness of Sonia and the rest of the staff, and partly because we can walk to them and to the other shops, and see familiar faces behind the counters. We support our shops even if their prices are higher than Tesco's. George puts his sandwich board out on the pavement seven mornings a week. He and his wife have named their taverna after the Cypriot mountain which the green and trees of this, their adopted area, reminds them of.

We'd still be a residential area without them and our parade, but that's all we would be.