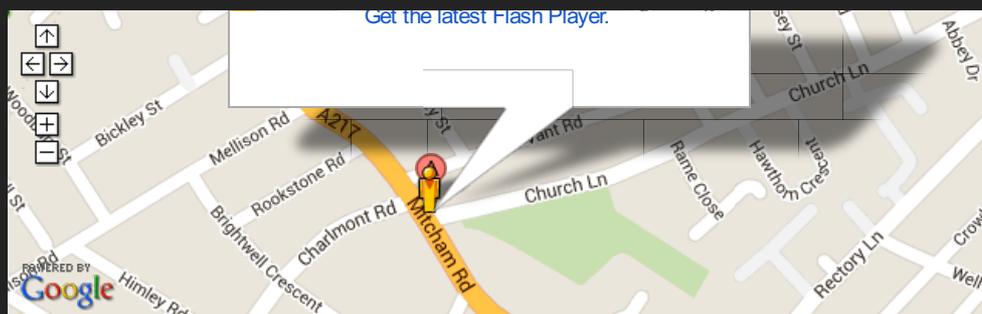


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## The Little Bar

Posted by [admin](#) on October 12, 2013 – 7:19 pm



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The other evening Lee and I watched an intriguing BBC show presented by [Robert Peston](#) about the death of the British High Street. The message was quite clear: financial crisis of 2008 coupled with the unstoppable force of online shopping, the great British high street has become a wasteland of charity shops, betting shops, pound shops, coffee chains, and convenience stores. Since we've been back in Britain and certainly since the [Cameron-Clegg](#) partnership began, the question of how to fix Britain's high streets has filled countless newspaper columns, inspired television shows, and even generated a [failed government commission](#) lead by [Mary Portas](#), a retail expert/TV presenter who is well known for her ability to turn-around fledgling shops. While there are many suggestions as to how to fix what is clearly broken, from where we stand now, not much has really had an impact.

As Labour points to the austerity policies of the Conservative, and the Conservatives point the finger back at the free-wheeling policies of the Labour party, the fact remains that the British high street is in dire straights. Perhaps the most basic assessment is this: changing the fortunes of a single shop is a full time job, changing the face of a parade of shops takes a community, and creating a lasting solution for the state of the British High Street, that takes a nation, a great nation that has significant resources and is willing to spend that money to regenerate. And even more importantly, once the shops have been regenerated, it requires a population that can confidently and consistently spend money within these shops to keep the high street alive.



On paper this sounds pretty straight-forward, unfortunately, when put into practice, it is far from simple. It's not a black and white case of the Professor Plum in the Ballroom with the Candlestick, but rather a myriad of issues that have come together to kill the high street as we have grown to know it. Incredibly disproportionate distribution of wealth in Britain and the US, the surge in online shopping, and the seemingly endless rash of chain stores dominating the street have all played their part in the demise of what was once dubbed by Napoleon as "[a nation of shopkeepers.](#)"

While the economic policies of Reagan/Thatcher, Clinton/Blair and Bush/Blair have been instrumental in creating a global economy that is so extremely skewed in the favour of a handful of über-rich ([10% of the population holding 43% of all the wealth in the UK](#), while in the [US](#), that figure is 75% held by the top 10%), I would also venture a guess that there is also a fair amount of apathy across the general population within the Western world that is also partially to blame. As long as we have our iPhones and our lattes and our flat screen TVs, we can put up with losing a shop here or library there. It's not really our problem, pass me a [Pret](#) sandwich please.

Just last week I had the good fortune to hear an amazing entrepreneur, [Clive Jackson](#), speak at a breakfast I attended. The crux of his message was this: most people encounter a problem and then complain. An entrepreneur encounters a problem, complains and then does something about it to fix the problem. It is when he or she embraces the problem and finds a solution, that is where progress begins.

Which brings me to The Little Bar. At the beginning of summer, Lee and I were on our way home from our local

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pub, when we passed by the abandoned hair dressing salon at the bottom of our road. Since moving to Church Lane, we had seen it first as a salon for black women, and later saw advertisements for Polish hair dressers. Then suddenly one day, the lights were all out and the place was boarded up. This boarded up shell stood at the corner of Church Lane and Mitcham Road for months. But on this evening, something interesting caught our eye, it was an application for a license to become a bar pasted to the shop front. Intriguing. We tried to peer into the window, into the unlit space, but shrugged it off and made our way home chatting about what kind of bar it might be, and convinced that it was too small to succeed.



A few weeks later, we passed by again, and this time there were lights on, the door was open and inside amidst the construction was a charming couple, Madeleine and Martin. They welcomed us into the space and gave us a tour. The space had been completely transformed from a dry and set to what would soon become "The Little Bar." The four of us nattered like we'd known each other for years, and Lee and I marvelled at their insight. It was clearly what the neighbourhood needed: a smart bar that had a limited selection of cocktails (not readily found in Tooting), some hand-crafted beers from smaller English brewers and a few favourite Belgian imports. Top that off with some interesting nibbles, and as the Brits say, "Bob's your uncle." They invited us to join them that Wednesday for opening night.

Lee and I did stop in on the Wednesday and were delighted with what we found. The construction zone had been cleaned up, revealing a lived-in chic decor that was relaxed and inviting. Martin and Madeleine greeted us again with open arms, and we enjoyed the buzz of our new neighbourhood local

It is that "can-do" attitude and entrepreneurial spirit that Madeleine and Martin embody. Where others just saw a boarded up shop and probably moaned about it, these two most likely complained a bit, but then did something about it. Rather than wait for another seemingly inevitable charity shop, Madeleine and Martin did their homework, took out a lease, got a liquor license and opened what has since become one of the most thriving new venues in south London. That is what being an entrepreneur is all about. That spirit is what Britain (and the US, I dare say) needs more of. People willing to try to succeed. While I'm no social Darwinist, I do catch myself sporting a wry smile when I think of the immortal words of Mme. Chiang-Kai-Shek, "The Lord helps those who help themselves."



Since opening its doors in June, the Little Bar has flourished. Lee and I regularly pass by and are amazed at how on any given night the place seems to be packed. Since its opening, I have also had the great fortune of doing not one, not two but THREE photo shoots at the Little Bar. Two of the shoots were for one of my favorite clients, Kinleigh Folkard & Hayward, and the third was creating a Google tour of the place for Streetview. Have a look around, it's not that big.

In looking at the immediate success of the Little Bar up against Robert Peston's epitaph for the British high street, I would have to say that there is a glimmer of hope, but it is a glimmer that will only succeed the nation as a whole embraces it. This is no longer the high street of your Nan or even our parents. Global companies may dominate the landscape—yet still, opportunities are out there. It means finding goods and services that people cannot get from the Internet and taking a risk to bring people your way. The old adage, "if you build it, they'll come" paired with "pick yourself up by the bootstraps" should be our mantra if we really want to see our high streets flourish once more. Cheers to Madeleine and Martin (and all the others like them) for being willing to move forward!

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