

'ALL THE KEY ISSUES WERE LOOKED AT VERY CLOSELY'

BIRDS LANE

The arrival of Waitrose could well 'kick-start' new era for Cowbridge



Jeff Bird and sister Heather Brock: "We wanted something appropriate for the town".

REPORT by PHILIP IRWIN

THE arrival of Waitrose in Cowbridge could give the town the impetus to take another step forward as a shopping destination in the Vale and beyond.

That is the opinion of brother and sister Jeff Bird and Heather Brock, who run the family business RS Bird Ltd.

Jeff told *The GEM*: "I think there are parallels with the late 1960s and early 1970s.

"That was when we opened the garden centre on the Birds Lane site - and garden centres were a new thing in those days.

"At the same time, a Cardiff-based hairdresser opened. A lot of people said it was too expensive but those two businesses attracted a new range of customers to the town.

"In the next few years, fashion boutiques started opening, and Cowbridge was on its way to developing its own style as a market

town." Heather and Jeff think that Waitrose could kick-start a similar new wave of customers, and they are adamant that the future of Cowbridge was uppermost in their thoughts when they lost their garden centre tenant, Hurrans, which went into administration in January 2009.

The result is that an 'agreement of lease' has been exchanged between RS Bird Ltd and Waitrose and, subject to planning permission, a medium-sized Waitrose foodstore - 15,000 sq ft of retail space in a building totalling 22,000 sq ft, with parking for more than 140 cars - is on its way to the town.

The entire development will be built by RS Bird Ltd and Waitrose will be a tenant. The family has, after all, been trading in Cowbridge since 1796, and intends to keep it.

Jeff said: "We recently discovered paper-

work showing that the site was bought 116 years ago.

"To be honest, that was a slight disappointment, because the family had believed that an ancestor had 'acquired' the land by fencing it off in the dead of night."

The old story was, it has to be said, a little more colourful.

When Hurrans went into administration, Jeff and Heather took a long, hard look at the site. The garden centre, if it were to be retained, needed a great deal of work. They appointed Alder King as their advisors, and possible options for the site were researched.

Their brief to the consultants was based on the fact that Heather and Jeff live in Cowbridge and they wanted to develop something appropriate for the town.

Heather said: "Living and working in such a wonderful location meant that we had to juggle the commercial needs of the business with our desire to bring something to the town that would add to its

vibrancy and uniqueness."

Alder King's advice, from an early stage, was that the best option was to continue retailing from the site. The garden centre had been opened in the 1960s.

When a foodstore became a strong option, Waitrose was the candidate that seemed to fit at every stage. Jeff said: "It fell together really well.

"For instance, the size of the store seemed to be exactly what Waitrose wanted, and we are pleased that they are coming."

Jeff and Heather feel that all the key issues have been looked at very closely. The obvious one, that of access to the new store, has been tested already, with computer simulations done, and also a series of visits from incognito Waitrose delivery lorries.

Jeff added: "People might forget that when the garden centre was trading, we had 20 lorries a day coming to make deliveries."

The next move is for the plan to go out to public consultation, and

Waitrose will bring 120 new jobs to town

WAITROSE confirmed to *The GEM* that it is drawing up plans for its first-ever shop in Cowbridge, which will create up to 120 new jobs for the town.

Subject to the feedback received during a public consultation exercise, RS Bird will finalise the plans and submit a planning application with a view to development and opening by 2012.

A Waitrose spokesman said: "Waitrose is working with RS Bird on a proposal for a 15,100sq ft food store and dedicated car park with more than 140 spaces.

"The proposal may also include other non-food retail units.

"The store will create 120

jobs for local people, who will all become partners in the John Lewis Partnership.

"This will entitle them to a share in profits in the form of an annual bonus, which ensures profits from a Cowbridge shop will be reinvested in the local economy."

Nigel Keen, Waitrose director of development, said: "We have wanted to come to Cowbridge for a very long time, but have needed to be patient while we looked for a location that would meet the town's needs.

"The previously developed town centre site will enable us to achieve that.

"It will provide us with the opportunity to make a major investment in the area without compromising the town's

residents and traders. "We are continuing to develop plans for a food-focused store which will remain appropriate in scale for Cowbridge, while enhancing the choice of shopping facilities already available.

"We believe the store can provide a real boost to the local economy, not only creating nearly 120 new jobs, but through supporting local projects and exploring new opportunities for local and regional suppliers.

"Listening to the needs and the views of the local community is paramount in our approach and we look forward to speaking to local shopkeepers and residents at the forthcoming consultation event."

details of what that will entail will be announced shortly.

After that, planning permission will be applied for - probably around December, and after planning, a period will be set aside for any judicial review that might arise.

Heather and Jeff stressed that any timetable could be subject to change, but construction could start in July or August of 2011.

A possible opening date, subject to change, would be Easter 2012.

Alun John, the chairman of Cowbridge Chamber of Trade, said: "The general feeling talking to most of the traders is that it is a positive move.

"From the chamber point of view, it is good that it is on the Hurrans site, which is in the centre of town."

Mr John said he

hoped that it would benefit Cowbridge in the way Waitrose had helped Monmouth, but pointed out that whereas the Waitrose in Monmouth was at one end of the high street, the fact that it would be more central in Cowbridge would encourage people to browse more while visiting the town.

He stressed: "There does have to be sympathy, though, for local businesses who will be affected by the arrival of the supermarket."

He pointed out that Waitrose was a store which would draw people into the town - something other supermarket chains were unlikely to do because they were widely available already.

There was, of course, sadness for the current tenants in the old Hurrans building, the antique centre and the Living Cafe.

However, John Owen, who rents the space for the antiques centre, had only warm

things to say about the arrival of Waitrose.

He said: "If it had been another supermarket, I would have been up in arms about it.

"However, the fact is that Waitrose should have come here years ago. It would have benefited the town then and it will certainly do so now.

"It offers something different and draws customers from a much wider area."

He added that all the traders had gone into the centre with their eyes open, knowing that some development was highly likely. They had, he said, hoped that it would take a few years longer.

Mr Owen pointed out that the antique centre had done its bit in attracting customers to Cowbridge.

He said: "We have regulars coming from west Wales and from Chepstow in the east. They liked the fact that we were a genuine antiques centre, with no reproduction furniture mixed up with it."

In fact, he said, the BBC had been down recently filming for a programme entitled *Antiques Trail* - due to be broadcast next spring, and that the production team had called it the best centre of its type that they had come

across. He added: "I don't think the traders can afford to stay in Cowbridge now. The rents are too high and it will be impossible to find a decent-sized premises in the middle of town.

"I am afraid that Eastgate and Westgate do not get the footfall."

By the time the lease runs out, The Living Cafe will have been on the site for four years, run by Karen and David as a Fairtrade and ethical cafe.

It was a philosophical Karen who said: "We always dreamed of running a Fairtrade cafe, so in a sense we have been living that dream.

"In fact, on Monday two prominent members of the Fairtrade Foundation, who were on a charity bike ride, made a detour so they could visit us.

"I was so thrilled about that."

She added that the Living Cafe had always enjoyed "fantastic support" from a group of loyal customers.

However, she felt that there was "no chance at all" of finding a similar-sized unit in Cowbridge at an affordable rent, so she and David would be considering what to do in the future.

WAITROSE OPENING IS A STEP NEARER!



ABOVE (left to right): Roger Bird; Peter Stanton (contracts manager for Kier Construction); Heather Brock; Owain James (site manager); Diana Bird; Julian Anderson (project manager); Jeff Bird; and Sam Allen (business development manager for Kier). PHOTOGRAPH by MIKE WILCOCK.

Thursday, October 18th, 2012

THE WAITROSE OPENING IS NOW ONE STEP CLOSER

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Mr Anderson said: "There were many days when we spent the first two hours simply pumping water away."

There had, he said, been no other complications, as the company was very experienced in this area.

He said: "I have been involved in 31 other supermarket developments, including two other Waitrose ones."

"I suppose the project that was most similar was one for Sainsbury's in Bath, where again it was essential for it to be in keeping with the town."

The final count in terms of parking spaces is 138. Mr Roger Bird reflected on the history of the site. He said: "At the turn of the century, it was a water meadow."

"My father was the borough surveyor and the 'director of nuisances' – and in that capacity he had to dispose of waste ash and bottles."

"They were deposited on this site for years, and eventually it was reclaimed. The first building was a garage for a bus company."

"My father opened a

motor mower business in 1924, and it was not until 1946 that the company expanded by taking on the Ferguson Tractor agency."

He continued: "In 1952, we decided to concentrate on the motor mowers, and sold the tractor agency, although they were still being sold from the site until about 1962."

Jeff Bird recalled: "It was in 1969 that the garden centre was opened – an easy date for me to remember because Wales won the Triple Crown and Glamorgan won the County Cricket Championship!"

The town had changed considerably over the years, particularly in terms of what it offered shoppers:

"I can remember my grandmother used to take the bus to Bridgend – to buy things she couldn't get in Cowbridge!"

Since then, there had been a steady expansion, and Waitrose would be the next step, by attracting more people into the town.

Roger Bird added: "I am really looking to Waitrose opening, it is another step forward for Cowbridge."

THE opening of a Waitrose foodstore in Cowbridge took another step forward this week.

Kier Construction, who built the foodstore and all the associated infrastructure, officially handed the site back to RS Bird Ltd – and the Bird family turned out for the ceremony.

Jeff Bird told The GEM that he was "delighted" with the quality of the development.

He said: "I am particularly pleased that it feels so rural, with so many trees surrounding the site."

He added that the extensive use of Vale stonework had meant that it has stayed in keeping with the look of the town.

Waitrose's shopfitters have been in the building for a while, but the hand-over means that the company can now bring in staff to prepare for the store's opening date of November 1.

Julian Anderson of Kier Construction said that finishing the project on time had been quite an achievement, considering the amount of rain that had fallen in June and August.

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(CONTINUED ON PAGE 7)

Plan for new shops between town and Waitrose development

by PHILIP IRWIN

THE walkway that takes shoppers in Cowbridge from the High Street to Waitrose could soon pass two extra shops – if a recently-lodged planning application is successful.

At the moment, the site of the shops is hidden behind the high wooden fence that borders the walkway, but the architect's drawing (on right) gives an idea of how the new building might look.

It will be a three-storey building, with the two shops on the ground floor, and with a two-bedroomed flat on each of the first and second storeys.

Land to the rear of No 16 and No 18, High Street. (Jon Ian and the Hair Business) is earmarked for the plan, and the car parking spaces allocated to the building would be reached through the archway adjacent to No 22, High Street.

The proposed new property is some distance from the existing High Street shops.

The plan is likely to go before Cowbridge with Llanblethian Town Council on September 1, and the next scheduled planning meeting of the Vale Council is September 6.

The planning application has been placed by G Oakley and Sons, Cowbridge, and Draig Ltd, the two companies that own the land, and the comments by the Vale Council planning office are encouraging.

Although it is part of the conservation area, the report describes the area at present as rear yards that are "somewhat untidy and unkempt, making little contribution to the area".

The report goes on to say that the scheme would complement recent work and that it would make a "significant visual improvement".

The report sadds that the new buildings would "mask the air handling units and fire escape at the rear of No 18".



ABOVE: The walkway as it is today and (below) an artist's impression of how the new shops and flats would look. The fence at the rear of Costa Coffee is on the right of each picture .



WAITROSE FOOD STORE COULD BRING 120-PLUS JOBS TO COWBRIDGE

Two-day consultation starts on Bird family's multi-million pound redevelopment scheme



WAITING FOR THE GO-AHEAD...

LEFT: An artist's impression of the approach to the proposed new Waitrose store – if the Bird family's redevelopment goes ahead in Cowbridge, also showing planned small shops to the left of the pedestrian crossing.

THIS is the glimpse of the future that will be unveiled to local residents tomorrow (Friday) when the multi-million pound scheme for a new Waitrose food store in Cowbridge is the centre of a public exhibition, which continues on Saturday at the former garden centre in Birds Lane.

The ambitious redevelopment by RS Bird Ltd of its town centre site also includes proposals for six

smaller shop units and free public parking for 150 cars for up to two hours.

The purpose of the exhibition is to obtain public feedback, with a view to submitting the Bird family's scheme to the Vale Council for planning approval in the middle of December.

If granted, the purpose-built new store intends to recruit 120 staff and is expected to open its doors to the first customers in spring of 2012.

Up to 40 other jobs for local people are also

expected to be created in the smaller shops and the development will offer opportunities for local producers to supply Waitrose with their goods.

As first revealed in The GEM, Waitrose will lease the building from the long-established Cowbridge family, who say they are "desperately keen" for the public to go along to the consultation and see the plans in detail.

"We are very proud of our long association with the town and we are anxious to hear the views of

the residents," said Heather Brock.

In fact, the family link stretches back to 1796 when Edward Bird opened an ironmonger's shop at 14 High Street, now occupied by Martins newsagents. ("Contrary to town rumour, it will not be affected by the new development," the family insist).

The public consultation takes place on Friday from 10am-7pm and on Saturday from 10am-2pm, with the Bird family and representatives of Waitrose all present to answer questions.

Locals look at the fine detail of Waitrose plan

COWBRIDGE residents were out in force last week, to take a close look at plans for a Waitrose foodstore in Cowbridge.

On Thursday, Friday and Saturday, an exhibition was held at the old Hurrans Garden Centre, and a steady stream of locals came along to examine the plans.

Jeff Bird and Heather Brock, who as RS Bird Ltd will build the entire development on their town centre site, had arranged for representatives of Waitrose, architects Kennedy James Griffiths, and consultants Alder King, to be there to answer questions.

Jeff Bird told *The GEM* that he was "delighted" with the number of people who had come to the exhibition, saying that it

by **PHILIP IRWIN**

was an important part of the consultation exercise.

Many were writing their comment forms there and then, while some took them home to fill in at their leisure.

All the exhibition team maintained that the response had been overwhelmingly positive.

Charles Russell Smith, of Alder King, said: "I think there is a strong sense among locals that Cowbridge missed out 10 years ago, when a Waitrose development was proposed.

"A number of people have said that it would have been a great benefit to Cowbridge."

The architect for the scheme is a former Cowbridge Comprehensive student, Simon

Kennedy, who now lives in Pendoylan with his wife and young family.

He told *The GEM* that it had been exciting to work on an important scheme so close to home, and that knowing the area and the site well had been a great help.

Mr Russell Smith said there had been some discussion around the footpath which joins Cowbridge High Street next to Martins newsagents, and which then winds towards the Twt Park.

Under the new scheme, the footpath will skirt the Waitrose car park.

However, Mr Russell Smith said that it would be improved, particularly at the High Street end, where it would be made suitable for the disabled by installing a ramp, instead of the existing steps.



The consultation was well attended by local residents.
(PHOTOGRAPH by MIKE WILCOCK).

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Waitrose food store could bring 120-plus jobs to town
SEE STORY ON PAGE 3



GLIMPSE OF THE FUTURE IN COWBRIDGE?

Huge crowds here

NEWS

WAITROSE PLAN GOES ON SHOW!



ABOVE (left to right): Rob Cadwell from Waitrose; Heather Brock; Catrin Hall, a store assistant from the Pontprennau store; and Jeff Bird.

***PHOTOGRAPH by MIKE WILCOCK
(Turn to page 25 for report).***