

# Why Tesco boycott was over the minute he spied those doughnuts

What? I said. You don't mean to say that's it? I rubbed my eyes and emitted a sigh as tragic as Prince Charles on beholding the blueprints for the gherkin. For a year they had been toiling at a building site just down from where I live. The jackhammers had been a-thumping and the cement mixers had been churning, and the whole scene had been a ferment of anti-like activity, and all the while my excitement had been rising. What was going on behind the dust sheets? What surprise were they preparing for the neighbourhood, all those workmen who tramped every morning from the Tube?

Now the long-awaited day was at hand. The scaffolding was down; the dustsheets were whipped off – and look at it! Look at it and weep. Here was a chance to distinguish the cityscape with something both useful and noble. Here we were in a prime location, not far from a major transport hub, a famous old park, and all the shops, theatres, restaurants and other civilised amenities of Upper Street Islington. Here, now, surely was the moment for 21st-century London to make some kind of assertion about our times and our tastes – to send a message to posterity about the kind of thing we really liked.

And what did we get? We got red brick, slabby featureless yards of red brick, with no architectural punctuation except the featureless square windows. I mean no disrespect to Norway when I say it could have been a cut-price motel in Trondheim or possibly the hell on earth of small gas

company. It looked about as exciting as a Dutch VD clinic.

And yet this was the best we could do; this was our way of dealing with the housing crisis in London – a medium rise block of brick-faced anonymity.

My eyes travelled listlessly from the roof to the ground floor, where a new shop was being proclaimed. It was – omigod – it was T-t-tesco. It was Tesco that had yet again cuckooed its way into the neighbourhood. Tesco the destroyer of the old-fashioned high street, Tesco the slayer of small shops, Tesco through whose air-conditioned portals we are all sucked like chaff, as though hypnotised by some Moonie spell.

Is it one pound in eight that Tesco now takes from the spending public, or is it one pound in seven? Am I not right in thinking that Tesco takes 47 per cent of the retail market share in Twickenham, and if I am, is that not slightly too much?

I remembered the businesses that used to occupy the site – the lovely Korean restaurant where they grew their own vegetables, the old-fashioned weighing-machine business with its royal warrants. I started to keen and rave, and I turned to my nine-year-old companion and announced a family boycott. That's right, I said: we were going to hit Terry Leahy where it hurt, and have a complete withholding of Johnson family custom.

We were going to use the excellent Turkish shops up the road; we were going to use Budgens, and if necessary we were going to grow marrows in the garden, just where we buried the



*If we want lots of little shops instead of supermarkets and lovely homes instead of concrete blocks, we must stop being hypocrites, says Boris Johnson*

hamsters. No one, I announced, is to buy anything from Tesco, and prepared to march on by with my head in the air.

But the nine-year-old was staring into the shop. "Look!" he breathed. I looked, and saw the shelves waiting to be stocked. I saw the happy employees getting ready for the grand opening, which falls today or tomorrow – and then I saw what had captured his attention. "Krispy Kreme donuts!" he cried, pointing to a whole new section devoted to this product, and I knew the battle was over before it had begun.

We will use the new Tesco. I will use the new Tesco. It has not only been constructed exactly half-way between the Tube and our house, so that the lure of the Krispy Kremes will be very hard to resist. The brute fact is that Tesco provides food of fantastic quality at reasonable prices; it stays open late; the staff are friendly – and yes, my friends, with a guilty ching ching I will add to Tesco's profits, because hypocrisy is at the heart of our national character – without the oil of hypocrisy, the machinery of convention would simply explode – and in a hotly contested field the British are at their most hypocritical when it comes to supermarkets.

We extol the small shops; we pretend to yearn for the days when you queued on sawdust for someone to climb a ladder and reach for a dusty tin at the back of a darkened shelf. But in reality we love the light and the space and the ease and the affordability of the supermarkets; and that, I realised, was why Tesco had managed to instal itself in yet

another location; not because the people at Tesco were megalomaniacal bullies, but because they were responding to public demand.

I walked on, shattered by this realisation. I stood convicted of hypocrisy in the matter of Tesco, and soon I was reassessing my response to the new housing on top. My heart might sink at the slabby red brick, but someone else might think, yippee: it's warm, it's safe, it's near the Tube, it has decent plumbing and it's within my means – and frankly, they aren't building that much of anything these days in London.

What this structure shows us, then – shop and housing together – is how the market can disappoint. If we want lots of lovely little shops (and post offices), then we must make sure to spend our money in them.

And if we want our housebuilders to create things of lasting beauty, with the adornment and colour and individuality that the Victorians took for granted, then we have to shout for them. Housing is in such short supply that we must either make do with whatever we are offered by the developers, on the grounds that beggars can't be choosers, or else we must fight and protest in the name of posterity and the future reputation of the age of Elizabeth II.

If you want housing that is beautiful as well as affordable, if you object to the clap-clinic air of some modern blocks, then join me now and build the movement.

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