There was a time the high street was the heart and soul of any town — always abuzz with people working, shopping and socialising. But now, shutters are down, windows are boarded and "For Sale" signs hang in abundance.

It's not a real shock. The high street has been struggling for years, thanks to high rents and online shopping, with the shock collapse of Woolworths in 2008 being the first hint times were changing. But the pandemic, lockdown and subsequent economy nose-dive have accelerated the decline, and as we hurtle toward a recession, the high street has become unrecognisable.

Experts predict mass redundancies. Many people have already lost their jobs, while 9.5 million remain on furlough, unsure when — and if — they’ll ever return.

High-street heavyweights Debenhams, Marks & Spencer, John Lewis and Boots have all announced store closures and job cuts, while 500,000 small, independent businesses could be forced to shut, too. And with UK job-centre claimants rising 126% to 2.8 million since the start of lockdown, it's a worrying time for everyone.

Woman investigates. JMi

'I WAS MADE REDUNDANT ON THE SPOT'

Alex Cooke, 44, lives in Shipley, Yorkshire, with her daughter, Ruby, 15.

I never regretted my choice to forgo university and go into retail at 18. After a management training course, I worked at House of Fraser as a fashion manager and loved everything about it. It was the hub of the high street, and I enjoyed working in fashion, seeing new products come in and getting to know the locals.

The hours were long, so when I had Ruby in November 2004, I retrained as a college tutor so I could be around more. By the time I went back to the high street, getting a job as a store trainer at Debenhams in 2016, things had changed.

It wasn’t as busy, and though we still got regulars, there was a visible difference in the way people shopped. They were less chatty and more often just coming in to collect online orders rather than shopping in store.

In autumn 2019, Debenhams announced some stores would be closing, but ours in Shipley town centre wasn’t on the list, and I always thought there’d be a need for my job, especially when you consider the Christmas shopping madness.

But then COVID-19 hit and everything changed.

In the weeks leading up to lockdown, there were barely any people in store and staff were growing increasingly anxious. Even when Boris Johnson announced lockdown and most of our staff were furloughed, including myself, everyone was confident we’d be back at work in three weeks.

Of course, that didn’t happen. It was a shock but I still believed that whenever this did blow over, my job would be waiting for me.

However, in April I was invited to a conference call and told that unfortunately the company was having to make cuts and my job no longer existed. I was made redundant on the spot.

I understood their reasons but it was still a shock, and it wasn’t like I could go and get another job because what was happening at Debenhams was happening across the board. I’m not sure if I’ll go back into retail.
everything feels uncertain at the moment, but I'll wait and see what happens. The city centre is now a ghost town. So many shops are shut or are closing down. My old branch of Debenhams doesn't look the same either - there's a skeleton staff, no testers are out, and it doesn't have a welcoming feel any more. Online shopping has been a godsend for many during lockdown. It's easy and convenient, but it's so impersonal. Soon, the only interaction we'll have when it comes to shopping is thanking the delivery driver for not squishing our packages. I'd give anything for the high street to go back to being the heart and soul of every shopping trip, but I think those days are long gone and I'm truly sad to say goodbye.

Talking About

‘IT’S UNLIKELY THE ECONOMY WILL BOUNCE BACK’

Prof Adrian Palmer, from Henley Business School, says: The economy has suffered a nasty shock. Stores such as M&S have traditionally been an indicator of spending — if they’re in trouble, the economy is heading into trouble, too. This time, it’s more complex as shopping has gone online — making up nearly a third of all UK consumer spending — and lockdown pushed consumers to learn new ways of shopping. It’s therefore unsurprising that announcements of closures and job losses are now commonplace. Sadly, there’s a consensus among economists that a recession is coming, though there is less certainty about its timing and effects. It’s normal when we go into a recession that consumers become cautious and put more money aside. Lockdown exacerbated this, with consumers unable to spend, so it found its way to savings. Will this saved money be spent rapidly, kick-starting the economy and preventing a spiral of decline? Or will falling levels of confidence, exacerbated by job losses, cut spending further? The prospect of a quick bounce-back is becoming less likely. Either way, the economy is heading into uncharted territory.

RECESSION SURVIVAL TIPS

1. Save what you can: Experts suggest saving about three to six months of wages.
2. Budget: Spend within your means and pay important bills first.
3. Cut back on luxuries: Spend less on shopping, freeze gym memberships, downsize phone plans.
4. Ask for help: Many providers are offering payment breaks and tariff changes.
5. For help, advice and support, visit justfinancefoundation.org.uk

DON’T LOSE HOPE

Katy Fridman, founder of Facebook community Flexible Working People, says: People are losing their jobs in their masses and it’s absolutely terrifying to see. They’re applying for jobs and just not hearing back, because there are hundreds of people applying for every role. But don’t lose hope! There are roles out there and many offer flexible working. Join groups — like mine — where job opportunities are posted, and refresh your CV or LinkedIn so you’re ready to apply. There’s no denying it’s a busy job market right now, but there is a role out there with your name on it.