

The irony of asking you not to read business articles during the current financial crisis is not lost on me. Negative news sells papers. One of the better motivational speakers once told me “watching the news or reading the papers will only depress you. If it’s important, they’ll ring.”

Owner managed businesses in the United Kingdom are facing a perfect storm. Brexit has been about as beneficial as we feared, and the impact of an economically unjustifiable immigration policy, arguably worse. COVID-19 has hit the supply chain harder than expected. Those of us that worried that Brexit would have macro-geopolitical implications could not have predicted how soon Putin would invade Ukraine. All the above taken into consideration, the least surprising thing has been the weaponising of energy. Take those fixed consequences and throw in the variable of a shockingly incompetent forty-five-day government, and here we are. Businesspeople will find it very difficult to stay in the day, supply a service, bill their customers then collect the money, but that is what we need to do.

When I first came to London, I did not know it well. I was in my early twenties and had met the mother-to-be of my children. We could have settled in Scotland and seriously considered it. Career decisions, as much as anything, meant that it was I who relocated to London. I joined a firm that happened to have several clients in Croydon. I had no real preconceptions about Croydon. I had spent half my childhood

THANK GOD FOR CROYDON

roughly halfway between Watford and Slough, so had experienced the northern and western Cardinal suburban capitals. Romford’s Romford with a positive self-identity thanks to Ford, Ronnie O’Sullivan, Tony Adams and Edward the Confessor.

So the southern point on the compass, Croydon, with its American underpasses and Thunderbird high-rise urban landscapes, was something of an unknown. As a Scottish boy in an English boarding school, I had no prior knowledge of London, never mind Croydon. If I thought of Croydon at all, it was through the perspective of the inter-war airport’s art-deco main terminal.

Those images of Poirot and Hastings at Croydon Airport cast a glamorous glow, which isn’t shared by many, but Croydon still provides an object lesson in today’s insanity. Croydon didn’t wait for the economy to bless it in the 1980s, or to crush it during the 1990s’ crash, forgotten in the turmoil of Liz Truss and the 2007 credit crunch. Croydon won’t be waiting for this government to stabilise because it was never relying on the state.

In the eighties, when I was travelling around Croydon and through its light-industrial estates in my Austin Allegro 1300, a car whose owners had the last

laugh, a Mini Cooper with legroom, ticking the books of what was left of the seventies owner-managed sector, former-foundry workspaces, local solicitors, insurance brokers, estate agents and motor dealers. I took them and their town at face value. Strong, focused and well-educated, these entrepreneurs worked hard, were good clients, successful, and respected. They lived in detached houses in villages resting on verdant hills, Purley, Kenley, Caterham and Woldingham.

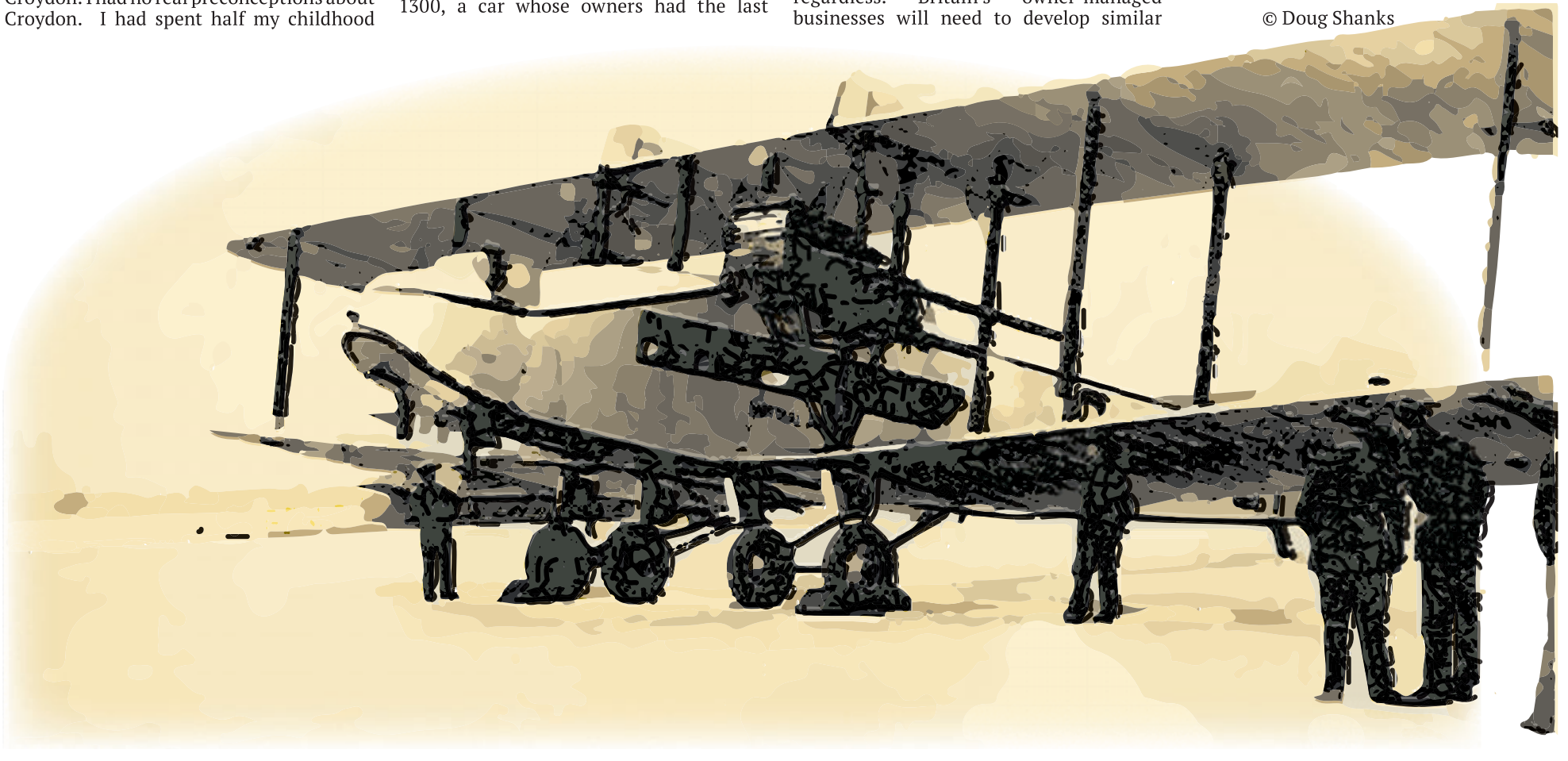
The business demographic will be similar. There will be better restaurants and posher coffee in line with the other homogenised high streets. Property prices are boosted by proximity to Gatwick, central London, and the growing care home sector, where Croydon’s suburbs seem to have a stock of larger houses set in their own grounds. Why is all this relevant? Croydon doesn’t mind its grey reputation and carries on regardless. Britain’s owner-managed businesses will need to develop similar

resistance, or rather, the good news is that it always has had that streak of independence. Transport businesses like Croydon, for its proximity to the Channel ports and tunnel, and equally central London, and the rest of England with the ease of access to the M25.

Although well-established many years before Gatwick and Heathrow, and remaining the country’s number one airport until 1946, Croydon Airport’s development was hampered by physical restrictions including its residential location and proximity to roads, not easily rerouted.

Croydon has always been a hidden treasure but as we go into a period of recessionary gloom it might be a metaphor, an object lesson in survival. There is something real about Croydon, an absence of artifice, a true rebel that remains aloof, just as our businesses will hopefully disdain to acknowledge any state-inflicted recession.

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