

Britt's still at the top of her game

No wonder Britt Sutton feels "on cloud nine". For hers is the only one of the 80 shops in Kingston's Bentall Centre to score full marks after a recent survey by a team of professional "mystery shoppers".

Her achievement is all the more remarkable because she is the only one-off, independent trader in the Bentall Centre, and has been since she opened there in 1993.

Aroma Secrets, her health and beauty salon, gained an overall score of 100 per cent in the survey.

Ranked in joint second place were Crabtree & Evelyn and Crew Clothing, both with 97.1 per cent, followed by Whittards, the tea and coffee specialists, with 96.8 per cent.

It is notoriously tough to survive as a stand-alone retailer in Kingston's premium-rated town centre.

But Britt has stayed at the top of her game since 1989 when she opened a salon in Apple Market before moving it to the newly-built Bentall Centre four years later.

Joseph Jagger, The Bentall Centre's retailer liaison manager, said mystery shoppers had been engaged "to assess the whole destination in terms of the customer service that

June Sampson's shop watch



we deliver...and where we sit among the competition, and against the national benchmark."

A total of 92 locations were surveyed, including all the retail outlets, the toilets, lifts and escalators, and many departments in Bentalls store.

And the result?

Mr Jagger said: "We beat the national average of 79 per cent with an overall score of 81 per cent."

Meanwhile, there's less happy news of two other independent firms in Kingston.

One is the collapse of Jacobs, the UK's largest independent camera retailer, which has closed its store in Clarence Street along with all but one of the other 18 stores in the group.

The other is the demise of Kingsworth Welding. The company, the only one of its kind in Kingston town centre, has been run by 84-year-old Rodney Strange and his 76-year-old brother, Jack, since 1966.

Today, June 29, they have

reluctantly closed their works in Walter Street.

"We don't want to go. We're as keen and skilled as ever," said Rodney, explaining that rising overheads, the double-dip recession and ruthlessly imposed parking restrictions outside their premises had so reduced profits they were in effect having to pay to go to work.

"Last year our take-home pay was £51.70 a week," he said. "Now it's dropped to £20."

The brothers, both highly trained, are born and bred Kingstonians, and both their father and grandfather were coopers at Hodgson's Kingston Brewery.

Now their decision to close Kingsworth has caused such dismay that it was sorrowful customers, not the Stranges, who informed the Comet and begged us to pay tribute to the pair.

"One of their specialities was shaping radiators to fit curved bays and other awkward spaces," said one. "I don't know of any other local firm with that skill."



Perfect score: Britt Sutton's Aroma Secrets health and beauty salon received a maximum 100 per cent rating in all aspects of the business – from courtesy and professionalism to cleanliness and decor

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