

NEWS REVIEW

McDonald's has been lovin' it in lockdown

When things got bad, we hit the Big Macs. How did the fast-food veteran come back even stronger? asks *John Arlidge*

Maccy D's is supersizing itself. It is recruiting at least 20,000 workers and opening 50 new restaurants in Britain and Ireland. Paul Pomroy, McDonald's UK boss, says he's not replacing jobs lost or furloughed but creating 20,000 new posts, to be followed by thousands more in individual restaurants run by franchisees.

The new direct hires will include burger flippers, drive-thru staff and meeters 'n' greeters who will help customers use the electronic ordering systems. "The great British high street is going to continue and we're going to be a big part of it," Pomroy says.

The Golden Arches might seem an unlikely beneficiary of the biggest economic shock in living memory. The pandemic has laid waste to retailers and finished off dozens of mainstream restaurants, including burger chains. Byron Burger, Zizzi's and Carluccio's have either shut down altogether or closed restaurants to stave off bankruptcy. Even Pret A Manger looks wobbly, as working from home becomes the norm. "The value destruction is epic," says Mark Robinson, chairman of the government's High Streets Task Force.

However, Nellie Nichols, a food consultant dubbed the "sandwich queen" for her work creating snacks for companies including Starbucks and M&S, is not surprised. She admits McDonald's may not be everyone's first choice "but it has never messed up the one thing people want more than anything in good times and bad: great taste – in its case the holy trinity of fat, salt and sugar. The burgers are always juicy and the special sauce sweet and tangy. The fries are always super hot and perfectly seasoned. And the chocolate milkshake tastes like liquid ice-cream."

The company has also hit the sweet spot on price, Nichols says. With family budgets under pressure, "McDonald's is an affordable treat". You can get a meal for four for less than £20. Greggs is cheaper but a vegan sausage roll is no quarter pounder.

Covid has helped McDonald's in other ways. Allyson Stewart-Allen, a business strategist who advises another lockdown winner, brewer SAB Miller, whose beer sales have risen sharply, says in hard times "people go back to brands that are comforting and reassuring". It helps in a pandemic that McDonald's food is seen as safe. "Consumers trust McDonald's to serve well-cooked food in clean restaurants – and if they don't want to go in, they can use the drive thru or delivery."

To Extinction Rebellion, and anyone over 40, the idea that McDonald's is expanding because of popular demand seems scarcely believable. Only 20 years ago the company was a byword for just about everything wrong with fast food and business. Eric Schlosser's book *Fast Food Nation*, which exposed stomach-churning food safety standards and ani-



mal husbandry in the burger industry, topped the bestseller lists. Morgan Spurlock's documentary *Super Size Me* – in which he eats McDonald's for every meal and falls really rather ill – won awards.

Dave Morris and Helen Steel, the "McLibel Two", won a public relations victory when they turned a defamation battle with McDonald's into a £10 million, seven-year-long marathon. McJob entered the Oxford English Dictionary, as "a low-paying, low-prestige dead-end job that requires few skills and offers very little chance of advancement".

"McDonald's is a masterclass of brand turnaround," says Rita Clifton, former chief of Interbrand who has worked on the transformations of Selfridges and Dixons Carphone (and has a weakness for filet-o-fish). How did it pull it off? By thinking outside the burger box, says Amanda Pierce, a strategist and communications executive, who worked with a succession of British and American chief executives in the noughties to "detoxify" the brand. "We changed the way we did pretty much everything – and then went out and shouted about it," she says.

Executives "fixed the food issues" by sourcing all ingredients locally in Britain and Ireland and using free-range eggs, Rainforest Alliance fair-trade coffee beans and organic milk. They cut the fat and salt in McNuggets and introduced carrot sticks, fruit juice, milk and water as part of Happy Meals "to tempt mums who are the gatekeepers of the family diet", Pierce says. "We kept the great taste but removed the guilt. There was suddenly no reason not to eat at McDonald's."

Salads made an appearance but were binned when it became clear that nobody

wanted them. Executives moved on to fix the restaurants. Out went the strip lights and cheap plastic seats that were sharply raked deliberately to make it impossible to sit comfortably and linger. In came Scandinavian-style woods, softer lighting and high-tech electronic ordering systems.

McDonald's backed up the moves with advertising that, instead of focusing on the product, targeted "the way McDonald's makes you feel", Pierce says.

Memorable ads include a man rushing out at night to a McDonald's 24-hour restaurant to get pickles to satisfy the cravings of his pregnant wife and the smug feeling a woman gets when she spends 99p, not £3, on a McCafé coffee.

In perhaps its boldest move, McDonald's decided to flip the notion of a McJob on its head by embracing, and promoting, it. UK bosses introduced a world first in flexible working and called it a McJob. Under the programme, several family members could train to work in McDonald's and then choose among



“Where else can you get a meal for four for less than £20?”

Cars queued in Chelmsford when McDonald's drive-thrus reopened

themselves who turned up to work each shift, with no need to tell their boss in advance who it would be. McDonald's then petitioned the Oxford English Dictionary to change its definition of the term. It failed "but we made our point", Pierce says.

Finally, under a new UK boss, Steve Easterbrook – who went on to become the company's global chief executive at its Chicago headquarters (before being fired after a sex scandal) – McDonald's decided to stop ignoring its critics and debate with them on television. Easterbrook appeared with Schlosser on *Channel 4 News* and *Newsnight*. He also set up a website called "Make up your own mind" and invited critics to write in and ask questions about the business.

What does McDonald's post-pandemic expansion tell us about which other brands might prosper on the high street? "It proves that you can succeed in the worst market by sticking to what you're good at," Stewart-Allen says. "McDonald's knows exactly what it is – a burger company that sells reliable, affordable fun – and does not try to be anything else."

Other high-street brands that have a similar focus and consistency include Nike, Starbucks and Aldi, she says. Stewart-Allen contrasts these with the likes of GAP, J Crew and Superdry "that seem to have forgotten what they do better than anyone else, who they appeal to, and how to reach them".

Clifton agrees: "Whether you like McDonald's or not, its success shows that if you have something distinctive and offer it brilliantly, day in, day out, you can weather just about any storm."



Babis Anagnostopoulos has been charged with killing his wife Caroline Crouch based on data from their gadgets

A clever criminal won't wear a smart watch

Everyday devices are now among the police's vital tools, says *Rosie Kinchen*

When Paul Massey, a well-known figure in Manchester's gang scene, was shot dead on his doorstep in 2015, police had a suspect in mind but they didn't have the proof. The crime went unsolved until three years later, when one of Massey's associates, John Kinsella, was killed in almost exactly the same way.

"There were similarities in the MO [modus operandi] of the offender," says Carl Jones of Greater Manchester police, who was senior investigating officer on the case. "The attacker was dressed in cycling gear, he waited for the target and carried out the shooting at point-blank range." But it wasn't until they raided the home of their prime suspect, Mark Fellows, that they found the necessary proof. Fellows was a fitness freak, and the data on his smart watch was vital in convicting him for the crimes.

Smart technology is becoming an essential tool in solving crime. Earlier this month, police in Greece charged Babis Anagnostopoulos with the murder of his 20-year-old wife, Caroline Crouch, after data from her smart watch showed that her heart had stopped at least an hour before he claimed their house had been broken into.

The helicopter pilot said his wife had been killed by Albanian burglars. But police revealed that Anagnostopoulos had an app on his phone to measure his steps. It showed repeated movement from the attic to the basement of the home at the time he claimed to have been tied up by the raiders, around 5am on May 11.

Earlier this year, police requested video footage from residents' smart doorbells to track Sarah Everard's last steps in south London before she was abducted and killed.

Jones says the discovery in Manchester was a stroke of luck. Fellows, a keen runner and cyclist, owned a Garmin Forerunner GPS watch, which he had put in a drawer and forgotten about. During the raid on his house the police found it and sent it to an expert for analysis. "Our hypothesis was that the offender must have driven and parked some miles away, then walked or run and lain in wait for Massey before they assassinated him. I called it the James Bond theory," Jones says.

The data on the watch proved that they were right. In the three months before the murder, Fellows repeatedly travelled the exact route to the crime scene. Not only could the police see where he was going, but they could also tell when he was on his bike and when he was on foot. "He was doing some reconnaissance," Jones says.

For years the potential of smart devices and the "internet of things" has

promised to revolutionise police work. Now it seems that time has come. Today internet-connected cars, fridges, doorbells, fitness devices and even coffee makers are within the reach of ordinary consumers and are becoming a common feature of our lives. It is only natural that this will have an impact on solving crime. "I think everyone realises – good guys, bad guys, cops, robbers – that everything is being videotaped or tracked somehow," Andy Kleinick, the former head of Los Angeles police's cybercrimes section, has said. "Is it more difficult to commit a murder? I'd imagine yes."

Data from smart devices is playing a key role in a number of US cases. In one that has many parallels to the murder of Crouch in Greece, Richard Dabate told police that a masked intruder had assaulted him and killed his wife in their Connecticut home in 2015. His wife's Fitbit proved that this was not true, and he is now awaiting trial for her murder. In another case, Ross Compton told investigators he woke up to find his Ohio home on fire, but his pacemaker told a different story. He was charged with arson and insurance fraud.

It raises complex questions from a legal and data protection point of view. Our mobile phones are a treasure trove of information. Apps track our movements and record behaviour without our knowledge. The law is woefully out of date. A report by the Information Commissioner's Office has found that police forces were extracting, storing and sharing large quantities of information from mobile phones without appropriate basis in data protection law.

For police, accessing the data they need from third parties, such as Amazon or Apple, is more complicated. Tech firms will often resist sharing personal data. In 2015 James Bates was suspected of foul play when his friend Victor Collins was found dead in his bath. The police tried to get hold of data recordings from his Amazon Echo. The company refused twice before Bates eventually granted his permission.

Data can help build a case, but it's rarely enough to prove guilt. Jones was involved in the investigation into the death of Paula Leeson, 47, the heirress of a skip hire business, who drowned in a swimming pool in Denmark in 2017. The prime suspect was Donald McPherson, a convicted conman whom she had married three years earlier. McPherson had changed his name several times and taken out multiple life insurance policies on his wife. Police used a health data app on Leeson's phone to try to prove that McPherson was lying about their movements that night and he was charged with her murder. The Silicon Valley firms were very helpful even in lockdown, Jones says, but a judge directed the jury to return a not guilty verdict due to insufficient evidence.

The biggest challenge for police forces is the speed of change. New technologies are emerging all the time, and each one offers different possibilities for investigators. "You have to be forward-thinking in this day and age, because the landscape is changing all the time," Jones says.



The trouble with white, working class pupils

Zoe Beaty, from a single-parent home in Lincolnshire, asks why progress for some children has ground to a halt

It's interesting that they've used the word forgotten in the title of this report," says Sam Baars, director of research and operations at the Centre for Education and Youth. He is referring to the latest offering about the fate of disadvantaged children in British schools from the education select committee. The report, released on Tuesday and headed "The Forgotten: How white working-class pupils have been let down, and how to change it", purported to shed new light on a young demographic failed by the current system.

"I say that because it's just not really accurate," says Baars. "We've been talking about education inequalities for what seems like for ever.

What the report rightly argues is that we are just making incredibly slow progress."

The report set out challenges facing white working-class students – poor infrastructure in their home towns, lack of opportunity, and cultural issues such as family structure, to name a few. The report seemed to struggle to define working class (it used free school meals as the sole criterion), and played fast and loose with the term "white privilege", which served to fuel culture wars in headlines last week. "Has wokeism crushed the working class?" asked one newspaper. (The answer was a resounding no.) "The bigger story is that we still have this gulf between kids of less affluent

backgrounds and those from more affluent backgrounds," Baars says. "Very little seems to be happening to counter that. The question is, why?"

"It's not a straightforward issue," says Ruth Robinson, executive principal of Swindon Academy. "Many people have raised the issue of poverty and the effects that that can have on a child's education, and of course that's a huge factor." She adds that, because of the way schools are judged by league tables, it's difficult to attract good head teachers to take on the schools that need them most. Additionally, the bell curve applied to GCSE results – that only allows for a certain percentage of the highest grades to be awarded each year – sets the boundaries for achievement. "Guess who often misses out?" says Robinson.

Inequality can set in before school. "A huge thing we notice is how children develop from very early on. Some will have been read to or spoken to in ways that extend their learning from a young age; for others their whole experience and vocabulary is blighted from the start. It's very hard to catch them up."

Robinson adds that in her decades-long experience, she has found that children from non-white families often have additional layers of social support that contribute to educational wellbeing – larger, tighter-knit communities around them. "Where communities around the child are also religious, this can be a supportive and

grounding experience too," she says.

Remi Adekoya, author of *Biracial Britain: A different way of looking at race and a politics lecturer at York University, agrees. "I grew up in a middle-class home in Nigeria, surrounded by books. By 12 or 13 I was reading Dostoevsky. When your parents can help with homework, you're more prepared for everything that is brought to you at school.*

“Forgotten? We've been talking about this for ever



"Additionally, there are cultural factors that cannot be ignored. For instance, [compared with their white peers] children of immigrants tend to have a very can-do attitude. These kids will often get messages from their parents – work hard, you can achieve here. During interviews I've done with white kids, they often point to a lack of immediate role models."

By role models, Adekoya says he doesn't mean those on TV or in the media. Rather, it's seeing people in our own environment who have come from the same socioeconomic background as us and are achieving that makes the difference.

It's why youth clubs – part of my own childhood in Boston, Lincolnshire – are so essential for giving children from more deprived homes access to an alternative view of the world. Sweeping closures of these services have seen a correlating rise in crime. Similarly, a decline in access to programmes such as Sure Start, a New Labour outreach programme designed to boost the educational and life chances of disadvantaged children, has long been criticised.

In the late 1990s, as I entered secondary school, Tony Blair's famous call to arms, "Education, education, education", was election-winning policy. For people like me, growing up in a single-parent, working-class family, suddenly places at university and white-collar jobs were there for the taking. Social mobility and the

notion of fitting into middle-class standards was a driving factor in my aspirations. Boston was predominantly white, in a deprived area of Lincolnshire. After passing the 11-plus exams, I went to the local grammar, where the gap between the affluent and the underprivileged was obvious. Some girls had parents in prison, others rode horses at weekends. Most of us, including those with particularly insecure homes, were fixated on university and many made it, despite our school being deemed "ineffective" by Ofsted. My mum and I were determined that my path would change – and the idea of failing to get to university and of remaining in my original social class became laced with shame. Now I live a middle-class London lifestyle and visit home regularly, but rarely feel as though I fit neatly into either of the worlds I occupy.

"Much of the time, in white estates, there is still no drive for kids to go to university," Robinson says. "And I do think there's a lack of focus on trade professions. But what we're trying to do is give kids a solid grounding that delivers equal options for later education."

But there is no catch-all, simple solution and changes will not be quick. Still, Baars is adamant there were some hopeful recommendations. "What it acknowledges is that all parents want the best for their kids, but some might need some extra support to get that. It's a shame that the title was so misleading. But perhaps this is a useful start."