

MONEY MYTHS

THE MYTH: US BURGER CHAIN MCDONALD'S MAKES FINANCIAL CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE IRA.

THE REALITY: When the IRA murdered three-year-old Jonathan Ball in the March 1993 Warrington bombing, the town's two McDonald's restaurants found themselves the subjects of a hate campaign.

On the day of the bomb, the manager of a McDonald's near the blast site asked a policeman where he should evacuate his staff. The officer replied that inside the restaurant would be the safest place because: "You lot support the IRA".

Staff and their families were abused or threatened with violence, either face-to-face or via the restaurants' customer suggestion boxes, and there was a dramatic decline in business.

McDonald's communications officer Fenella Burns says: "The staff, who are primarily young people, were finding friends either ignoring them or calling them names. A couple of guys got spat on, a couple were thumped in the pub. It reached intolerable levels."

But why did these persecutors believe McDonald's backed the IRA?

The chain's own explanation takes us back to 1989, when a programme on personal finance made by US television station CNN, which discussed financial planning for retirement, was broadcast by satellite to the UK. Viewers heard the presenter describe how generous an employer McDonald's was in funding its employees' Individual Retirement Accounts – or IRAs for short.

This acronym is universally used in the US to describe the country's equivalent of the personal pension. But in the UK the letters IRA only mean one thing – the Irish Republican Army.

CNN became widely available in the UK only in 1991, when it started broadcasting on the Astra satellite and could be picked up on domestic satellite dishes. Prior to 1991, however, there were larger satellite dishes at some US Air Force bases in this country, which would have been capable of receiving CNN on the IntelSat 6 satellite. Perhaps it was a British visitor to these bases who started the ball rolling?

Whatever its source, the rumour spread rapidly among squaddies, with McDonald's in garrison towns vandalised and staff attacked or abused by off-duty soldiers.

A letter sent out by McDonald's chief executive officer Paul Preston to concerned customers says: "It is normal in the US for these individual retirement accounts to be known as IRAs and

for references to them in company accounts and payroll deductions to be shown as IRA contributions.

"It is clear how this abbreviation could easily lead to a complete misunderstanding, and we have therefore altered our procedures accordingly".

Things in Warrington are now mostly back to normal, but the rumour continues to raise its head all over the country.

On first hearing the whispers, McDonald's checked all its charitable and other donations, but could find no organisation or company with any conceivable link to the IRA. After all, why would any multinational corporation in its right mind court PR disaster by backing a violent terrorist organisation?

But with much British resentment about actual US funds reaching the IRA through organisations such as NorAid, perhaps McDonald's is simply suffering from being the most visible symbol of America on all our high streets.

Paul Slade

