

**BY SARAH GETTY**

ALLIANCE & Leicester yesterday announced the closure of 46 branches, blaming Internet and phone banking.

More than 300 staff, 111 of them full-time, will be affected by the closures, which start on October 1.

The group, which has 300 branches, said 80 per cent of retail banking transactions were now processed without contact with branch staff.

It said that, although the closures represented 15 per cent of its branch network, they accounted for just three per cent of sales of mortgages, personal loans and current accounts.

Chief executive Richard Pym said: 'Times are changing. Customers are not visiting their branches every week or even every month. They are finding it more convenient to use the phone, the Internet and cash machines for regular transactions and are increasingly looking at branches as places for more complex issues.'

The company said it would look to redeploy as many staff as possible, with the rest offered redundancy.

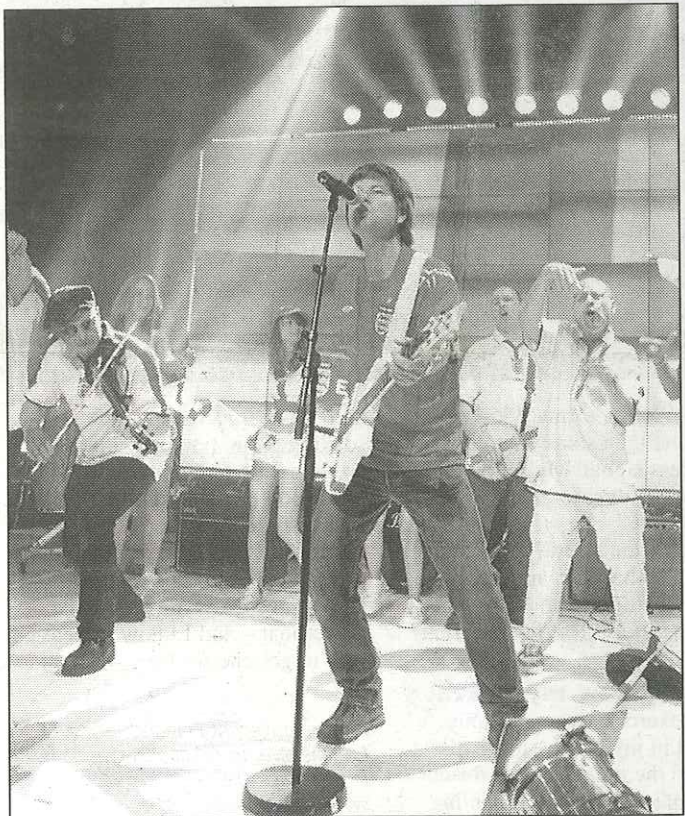
The closures will result in a one-off cost of £10million, followed by savings of £5million a year.

Analysts said the A&L move was part of a trend which had seen hundreds of bank branches close in the past decade.

**THE BRANCH CULL**

Bank	1994	2004
NatWest	2,410	1,634
BARCLAYS	2,090	1,680
THE WOOLWICH	511	390
BANK OF SCOTLAND	732	643
HSBC	1,706	1,587

**SOCCER BOOM FOR WIRELESS**



THE Wireless Group, owner of the talkSPORT radio station, yesterday announced revenues were up 90 per cent this month as it celebrated the success of a football record. TalkSPORT teamed up with Birmingham band 4-4-2 (pictured) to make Come On England, which entered the charts at No.2 on Sunday. 'Sung to the strains of Come On Eileen, this record is set

to replace Three Lions as the fans' favourite,' said a spokesman. The group will appear on Top Of The Pops on BBC1 on Friday. The Wireless Group said advertising revenues had soared because of the enthusiasm for Euro 2004. It made its first ever full-year operating profits of £2.3million in the year to December 31. Turnover was £32.6million.

*LONDON METRO 17/6/04*

**BUSINESS BITES**

■ Unemployment has fallen and the number of people claiming benefits is the lowest since 1975, figures showed yesterday. A total of 1.43million people were jobless in the three months to April, a fall of 9,000. The number of people claiming unemployment benefit fell by 12,000 to 862,000, the best figure for 29 years, the Office for National Statistics said. Despite the continued fall in unemployment, some sectors are continuing to contract. The

number of people employed in manufacturing fell to 3.38million – the lowest since records began in 1978.

■ Estate agency group Countrywide yesterday warned of the 'dampening effect' of recent interest rate rises but added that a price crash appeared unlikely. The group, which has 875 offices, including the Bairstow Eves and Mann & Co chains, told investors in a trading statement that business since March had 'continued in a very encouraging manner'. The first six

months of the year saw a rise in both sales and prices. The company added that it did not believe this would be followed by a slump.

■ Dental practice group Oasis Healthcare unveiled profits of £1.2million yesterday but said a shortage of dentists was hampering its ability to increase sales. The group said a 58 per cent rise in turnover to £73.9million in the year to March 31 would have been higher if it had been able to fill 26 vacancies at its surgeries.

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