

Midsummer Place moves on with expansion plans after record shopper footfall figures

THE OWNERS of Midsummer Place shopping centre are pressing ahead with their expansion plans after the centre recorded record footfall figures.

A total 17.5 million shoppers visited the centre in 2012, an increase due in part to the early start to the sales in November, which drew 11.3 per cent more shoppers than in 2011.

Shopper patterns also revealed a dramatic surge in the two weeks leading up to Christmas Day, with a year-on-

year increase of just over 10pc for the week beginning December 10 against the same week the year before and of 12.7pc in the following week compared to 2011.

Owner Legal & General Property submitted plans to Milton Keynes Council in October to create additional retail, catering and civic space within the centre.

Senior asset manager Helen Snooks said: "These latest figures are great news for the centre and Milton Keynes as a



● Retail mecca: Shoppers flock to thecentre:mk (pictured) and Midsummer Place

whole and clearly show the strength of the retail offer provided at Midsummer Place. "We strongly believe our

essential to the growth of 'high street' retail and keeping customers engaged."

● Shoppers flocked in record numbers to thecentre:mk over the Christmas and New Year holiday, say delighted centre executives.

Next, which completed its refurbishment and extension earlier this year, has reported a 30 per cent increase in sales, in particular of menswear and childrenswear. At House of Fraser, sales were up by 9pc on last year, while John Lewis

reported a pre-Christmas sales increase of 15pc on last year with takings hitting the £4 million mark - a figure not experienced since 2007.

Sales at Marks and Spencer Food Hall rose by 60pc. Boots hit the £1 million mark and extended opening hours contributed to a 6pc sales increase at BHS.

thecentre:mk's centre director Robert Hall said: "We are confident that we will continue to attract more crowds as we move into 2013."

Retailers are feeling the chill winds of change

I SUPPOSE it all started with the demise of the typing pool. The end of nearly everything, that is. Once every reasonably-sized office in the land had its pool of Miss Tappity-Taps, busily tappity-tapping away. And then, with the advent of the PC, suddenly they were gone. The IBM golfball typewriters were first emasculated and then became mere expensive scrap. The typist was extinct. Like the dodo.

It was a portent, the implications of which many missed in the 1970s and 1980s. The reality was that only medium to large 'head' offices were now essential and small offices would effectively become almost redundant. And this trend continues.

Former deskbound office workers at first worked more and more from home and then increasingly from their cars, train seats and coffee shops or while sitting in a restaurant or just walking down the street. A strong wind of change was blowing and it is gaining speed, changing the face of this and every other city.

The same wind is blowing in retail. Multi-nationals operating from low-rent industrial parks with only internet presence, thus undercutting the high street, are now the order of the day. A slew of once unassailable high street retail icons have, to a greater or lesser extent, fallen victim to their stealthy advances: Woolworths, Littlewoods, Gamestation, Clinton Cards, Comet, HMV, Jessops and Blockbuster are just a few on the roll call of the wounded or fallen. In a very few cases, stores that were gamekeepers have turned internet poacher; negotiated bailouts; been sold or merged or are struggling to parlay their once trusted name into online sales.

According to accountancy group RSM Tenon, in 2012 around 1,300 retailers became insolvent. More, inevitably, will follow. I fear bookshops, card shops and retailers of electronics or any branded goods are particularly vulnerable, as are any that sell items easily sourced online. And where once only hot food such as pizzas or curries

were delivered to your home, now every supermarket will shop until they, not you, drop.

I foresee a day where you will be strolling down a virtual aisle online, picking the actual apple you will be eventually eating. How long before they will not need stores at all?

As this trend further develops, established high street stores are desperately looking to extend their offers online or are offering

hybrids such as buying online and collecting at a real store: 'click and collect' or offering other 'clicks and mortar' mixes.

Loyalty

Price-conscious consumers are fine tuning their behaviour too. Many are visiting high street stores to 'audition' branded items, then affronting their hosts by buying the very same item from a separate online retailer while standing in the store. What price retailer loyalty in an age of shrinking household budgets and rising fuel, VAT, import and manufacturing costs?

Even John Lewis is beginning to feel the chill winds of change blowing around its 'never knowingly undersold' promise. Let's just say there are 'exceptions' and leave it at that, eh shoppers?

So, given that this is happening and that the rate of trend is accelerating, what does this mean for Milton Keynes? I believe it means two things. The first is to do with planning.

Our planners need to be ever more flexible and imaginative. As lobby group Urban Eden stated in its Urban Eden MK2050 - Principles for a Master Plan document published on June 1 2010 the following principles apply:

- Flexibility of design and build (i.e. repurpose buildings and land); offices to be converted for domestic or other use;
- Office reductions to be encouraged because of a rise in flexible mobile/home working environments;
- Planning regime should be flexible enough for all types of live/work scenarios

'Retail is changing super fast and, by grasping the nettle, Milton Keynes can be ahead of the game.'

(within the principles of good neighbourliness);

- The highest commonly available internet connection speed should be a basic planning requirement.

The second is to do with retail. Despite losing several retailers to administration, thecentre:mk and Midsummer Place are both in a healthier state than many comparable high street locations in towns of a similar size. However, in order to maintain this situation the answer is not to build more and more stores and hope that the people will

come. This is not the retail version of Field of Dreams. They will not.

Let's look long and hard at our realistic needs and while so many shops at the food centre languish empty - Waitrose closes soon - we should not be building more. Once our high-street-equivalent looks like a row of broken and missing teeth, its final gasp cannot be far behind.

Retail is changing super fast. We must be awake to this. And by properly grasping the nettle, Milton Keynes can be ahead of the game, not behind the curve. Cheerio.

Theo Chalmers



Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden.
www.urbaneden.org
www.vervepr.co.uk
e: t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk
Tel: 01908 275271

Alumni can inspire a new generation

TO CELEBRATE its first 30 years, Milton Keynes College wants to get in touch with as many as possible of its thousands of former students.

A host of reunion events are in the planning stages and a new Alumni Association has been formed with its own website.

College principal Dr Julie Mills says: "We really hope people will want to share their experiences of college life and see how the place has changed over the years. We know that many former students have achieved great things but there must be thousands of untold

stories of what our alumni have done. We think they could inspire a new generation to come here, to learn and to achieve great things in their lives as well."

The college is to put on a photographic exhibition of the 'College through the years' and is looking to unearth photos from past students and staff. Dr Mills says: "It would be wonderful to be able to show pictures from each of the past 30 years. We'd love to hear from anyone who has any old photos that they would be willing to have put on display."

It is hoped the website will give

current students access to the wealth of knowledge and experience accumulated by Milton Keynes College's alumni over the past 30 years, as well as the opportunity to network, share experiences and reconnect with old friends.

"We hope that some of those alumni who make contact would be willing to offer mentoring, give talks, provide work experience or give advice by sharing their views on life after college," says Dr Mills.

Alumni will have access to the college's careers advice service and a growing range of special offers, discounts and exclusive invitations.

Access to the Alumni Association is available to previous students of Milton Keynes College or the Further Education Colleges at Wolverton and Bletchley. To find out more, e-mail alumni@mkcollegealumni.co.uk or sign up at <https://alumni.mkcollege.ac.uk>

Twitter: @MKC_Alumni
Facebook www.facebook.com/MKCollege1
LinkedIn Search: Milton Keynes College Alumni.



● To start the ball rolling, the people at MK College would love to know if you can identify these pictures or any of the people in them. The judo team is from 1961 and we think the young man at his desk with the maths

set is from the 1940s or 50s, probably at the former Wolverton College site. The secretarial course could be from the 1950s or 60s. Do you recognise anyone? If you do, we'd love to hear from you.

