



# Retail gathers steam at St Pancras

The station was one of the first transport hubs to kick-start a change in travel retail. Rebecca Thomson finds out how

**N**ot so long ago St Pancras International station was in danger of being knocked down. Much like its nearby neighbour Euston – whose Victorian facade did fall victim to demolition – its 19th-century architecture fell out of favour with town planners in the 1960s. It took a spirited campaign led by poet John Betjeman to save the building.

Nearly 60 years later the renovated St Pancras International is one of London's most-loved buildings, and has helped change the way travel retail operates.

The renovated building opened in 2007 and since then a number of station overhauls – including King's Cross next door and Manchester Piccadilly – have been completed in a similar vein.

"I like to think we were a catalyst for change in what other stations have done up and down the country," says Wendy Spinks, commercial director at HS1 Ltd, the company that owns the building. "For some it was a bold step. The challenge for us now is to keep evolving."

St Pancras has 48 million customers a year coming through the doors, with an average dwell time of 40 minutes.

HS1 says average spend is £3 per visit, and that sales rose 4.5% in January compared with the same month last year.

Spinks says: "Before 2007 train stations were places where you could buy a sandwich and a newspaper, but they

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Wendy Spinks, HS1 Ltd

weren't necessarily places where you would go and sit and enjoy some time. Things like the champagne bar [Searcys] were a bold move, but really set the tone. It was about celebrating travel."

St Pancras has three groups of customers – international travellers on the Eurostar, domestic commuters, and people who live and work locally. The retail offer is designed to appeal to all three.

## Change in behaviour

High street names are there in spades, from two M&S Food branches to Boots, Pret a Manger and WHSmith.

Spinks says: "More people are travelling by train – passenger numbers into London are growing each year. That means they're time-poor and they like the convenience of having things on their way. There's a natural change in behaviour happening, which is why other rail stations are following suit."

The rest of the retail offer, from bookshop Foyles to a recently opened branch of Fortnum & Mason, is designed to bring a unique feel to the station.

Spinks says: "People who travel internationally are used to a pleasant shopping and food environment – we wanted an environment that was more than just a domestic train station. The whole concept was about creating an environment where people wanted to come and dwell."

She says that airport retail space provided an inspiration: "It was about creating open spaces so you could create a real travelling environment. We learned from what airports had successfully done with the retailing space."

The retailers at St Pancras International, which include Oliver Bonas, LK Bennett, The White Company and Neal's Yard Remedies, all sell goods that are fairly small and easily transportable. Spinks says the one category that works well for all three of the station's consumer groups is gifting.

It is crucial to get the category mix correct for the station's shoppers, but



it's also important that retailers help to give the station a distinctive feel.

Spinks says: "We need to work with people who are creative and want to be innovative and to do things differently. We encourage brands to do different, unusual and exclusive things as part of being here."

This can mean getting involved with the station's charity campaigns or designing store displays a little differently. It also means working within the confines of a Grade 1-listed building, something that Spinks admits is often a challenge.

The other big source of inspiration for the team at St Pancras was Grand Central Station in New York. Spinks says the mix is similar to the New York station's, with a sprinkling of independent

## SOURCED MARKET

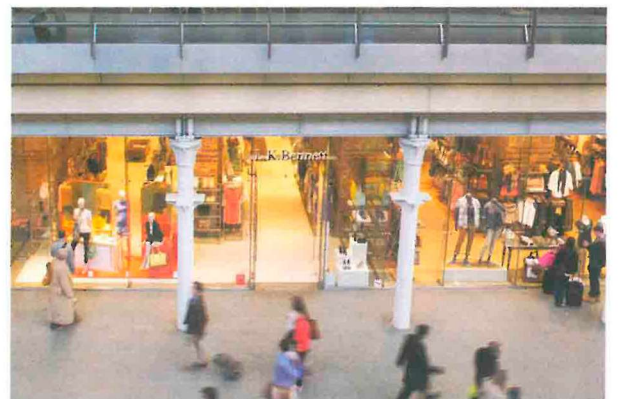
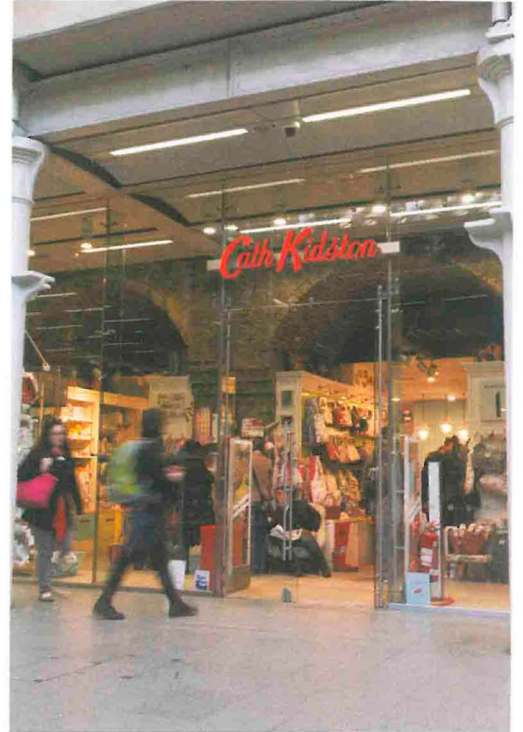
Sourced Market is an independent food store that opened in 2009, when high-speed domestic services started running from St Pancras International.

The shop, run by owner-operator Ben O'Brien, is now seeking to expand and is in the process of raising capital through crowdfunding. The St Pancras store is delivering 20% year-on-year growth.

St Pancras works closely with Sourced Market on marketing initiatives and ensuring it has the right offer at the right time. The station hosts various initiatives – such as live music performances and exhibitions – that increase dwell time and make it a place customers enjoy.



Retailers with a presence at St Pancras International include homewares retailer Cath Kidston, fashion retailer LK Bennett, independent food shop Sourced Market and Searcys champagne bar



stores such as Sourced Market (see box, left) sitting alongside a list of big names.

She adds that the two stations hold a similar status – they operate as working stations, but their architecture and history mean they’re also tourist attractions in their own right.

St Pancras has helped to give travel retail a boost, showing that stations can be bona fide retail destinations.

As Spinks says, it means station management and retailers both need to raise their expectations.

She says: “Even from very familiar brands, it’s about how you do something a little bit innovative. Retailing is no longer just a transaction that can be done online.”

St Pancras provides a good example of how to make a retail offer unique.

### LK BENNETT

LK Bennett opened in St Pancras in August 2008. The retailer decided to open at the station because it saw the potential to reach both affluent commuters and European travellers in a premium environment. It says St Pancras “felt closer to a luxury mall than a station concourse”.

Founder Linda Bennett is also “passionate about fine architecture” and was excited to be part of the revival of the station.

LK Bennett invested in its store during a period of large-scale change for the station, working in partnership with St Pancras to deliver a store that

showcases the brand’s recent collections.

The station’s team meets the retailer weekly to share consumer and traffic data, which helps with decision-making around the offer and in-store layout.

St Pancras uses LK Bennett as a case study for other retailers because of the positive results of its collaborative approach with the station’s marketing team.

LK Bennett also works closely with St Pancras’ communications team, supplying regular content for key campaigns and events hosted

by the station. This collaboration has been effective in driving new customers into the store.

The station works with the shop on its window displays to make sure they are in line with brand campaign activity around key product launches – the results of this are highlighted to other brands in the fashion category to improve overall window visual merchandising.

The store plays a big part in changing perceptions of the station as it works on improving the travel experience through its retail offer.