

SHOPPING CENTRES

Westfield's second

Residents of Bradford were angry after the recession forced Westfield to abandon its shopping centre plans there in 2008. But as **Tiffany Holland** finds out, things are back on track

Westfield is well known for its glossy London shopping centres – Westfield Stratford City hit the headlines after opening in time for the Olympics in 2012, while wealthy West Londoners and tourists alike have taken to its sister mall Westfield London in Shepherd's Bush. But it has been a very different story for the company's northern development, which until the beginning of this year was dubbed the 'Bradford hole'.

The Australian shopping centre developer, which owns 40 malls worldwide, started work clearing the site in 2004. But it sparked outrage when it walked away in 2008, leaving a 23-acre hole in the centre of the city – which is generally known for attractive architecture left over from its time as a hub for the wool industry.

"A lot of people said it devastated the city," admits Westfield director of development Duncan Bower. "But every retailer shut up shop. There were no deals, no construction happening."

Westfield bore the brunt as local MPs and residents blamed it for decimating the city and it became clear that plans to launch the new shopping centre in 2007 were falling apart.

"We even had protestors camped inside the site," Bower recalls.

"People said we should have continued our shopping centre but it would have been bad for Bradford."

"There would have been no tenants in the shopping centre, which would have had equal criticism. It would have been bad for the city and bad for us."

The recession had taken its toll on confidence in the construction sector – as well as shoppers' inclination to spend – and as consumers locked away their purses, retailers' plans for expansion were reined in.

Bower says retailers that had expressed interest in taking space at the centre simply stopped pick-

ing up the phone.

"You are clearly influenced by retailers when they're saying they're not talking to you any more. The decision was made for us by the circumstances," says Bower.

"It was a decision that no developer wants to make. Westfield was a very solid developer and could take the hit when other developers might not be able to."

A decade after demolition works first started, Westfield is back on site and building at pace, working towards opening the £260m Westfield Bradford Broadway by Christmas 2015.

"When we restarted it was a proud day. It was emotional," says Bower. "We've made incredible progress."

In 2011, Westfield successfully resubmitted an application for a smaller centre, a 550,000 sq ft project, down from the 620,000 sq ft, two-level mall originally planned.

Since January, Westfield has erected the steelworks, which are nearing completion, and this month it installed the first panels on the building as cladding began.

Floors are also being laid in the centre after the equivalent of 18 football pitches of steel decking were installed. The roof is to be completed over the next few months.

The groundwork had already been completed in 2004 before Westfield's return to the site, meaning much had already been done. That resulted in the next stage of the work only taking two years.

"It's interesting to retailers because they can see where they will be in two years' time," Bower said.

What's more, 50% of the 70-unit space has been let after Westfield signed top retailers including Next, M&S, Topshop, Debenhams, JD Sports and New Look among others. And Bower is determined to have it filled by opening day.

"It's got a great mix of shops. We've been very careful [in choos-

TIMELINE

2004 Westfield, Reuben Brothers and Multiplex acquire Chelsfield Assets for £585m, inheriting the Bradford site. Westfield demolishes buildings on the site and puts forward plans

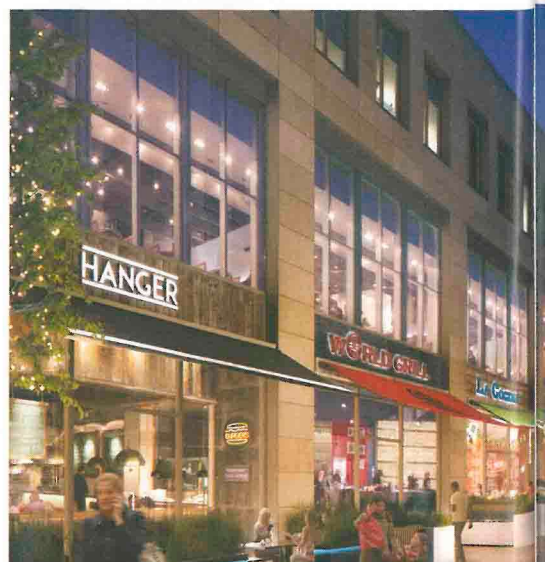
2008 The site is mothballed

2011 Westfield resubmits a planning application, shrinking the original plight to a 550,000 sq ft retail and leisure centre. M&S signs up as anchor

2012 Westfield sells the site to European fund manager Meyer Bergman for around £200m

DECEMBER 2013 Westfield reveals it will begin work in January 2014

JANUARY 2014 Work begins on site and things are on track for opening before Christmas 2015



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“understandably” are sceptical about whether Westfield will complete the project.

“But we are seeing green shoots of new optimism,” he says. “There are very supportive groups such as the Bradford Chamber, Bradford Property Forum and Bradford Breakthrough. We’re getting that platform of positivity.”

Westfield was not the only developer to mothball a retail project – Land Securities’ Trinity Leeds centre was put on ice in 2008 but opened in March last year, while work on the city’s East-gate centre, now called Victoria Gate, was also put on hold by Hammerson.

Bower says: “We opened Westfield London at the teeth of the recession and we were also developing Stratford. London came out of the

recession so much quicker than the rest of the UK – some would question whether it was in a recession at all.

“But outside, the whole development industry basically shut up.”

It hasn’t been an easy few years, but there are more positive signs starting to come through. One of the most significant moments of the past few years came when Trinity Leeds opened to much fanfare.

The pipeline is strong as well – Victoria Gate is to open its doors in 2016, anchored by John Lewis, while Westfield is also working with Hammerson on the £1bn redevelopment of Croydon’s Whitgift centre.

Bower says that since Trinity Leeds opened Bradfordians have been making the trip to that centre, demonstrating the demand for Broadway. “Bradfordians want to shop in Bradford. They will go to Leeds but given the opportunity to shop in Bradford they will do that,” he says.

The city has a bright future, he adds – Bradford is now seen as a digital hub in the UK and is to be one of the first cities to receive super-fast broadband, boosting the area further.

“The shopping centre will be transformative. It has been 10 years that the city centre has been put on hold. People will be able to walk through parts of it which they haven’t had for 10 years,” says Bower.

Bradford Broadway may not have had the drive of the Olympics behind it, but Westfield looks on track to finally get it across the line next year.

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Duncan Bower, Westfield



ing who to have], it’s not just about filling it up,” he says.

The project has changed hands after Westfield sold the centre to real estate specialist and fund manager Meyer Bergman in 2012. Two Canadian pension funds – Healthcare of Ontario Pension Plan and AIMCo – also invested in the site.

The sale came as Westfield changed its strategy after the recession put it under pressure.

“At the time we were a collector of shopping centres, so generally the more we had the better. But recently this changed and now we’re an owner and developer of assets,” says Bower.

But Westfield is committed to leading the leasing, design and construction of Bradford Broadway and will manage it on completion.

Bower says it has been difficult to gain the trust of some groups in the community again who

