

# Oxford in Wonderland

**Mia Hunt** joins the throng at the themed opening of the UK's latest shopping mall, Westgate Oxford, which is set to be a game-changer

For a city that is home to one of the world's top universities, has a wealthy catchment and plays host to more than eight million tourists a year, Oxford was woefully undersupplied with modern retail space.

Not any more. On Tuesday 24 October, a throng of excited visitors poured into Westgate Oxford, the UK's newest shopping centre, for an *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*-themed launch - Lewis Carroll wrote the novel in the city.

Developed by the Westgate Oxford Alliance, a joint venture between Landsec and The Crown Estate, the £440m, 800,000 sq ft scheme is a reincarnation of the 1970s-built Westgate centre - on the site of a one-time medieval friary - at the west end of Queen Street in the heart of the city centre.

For locals, a shopping destination that befits the city's reputation has been a long time coming. A proposed £220m rebuild of the original Westgate failed in 2002 when the council deemed it not in-keeping with Oxford's historic character and another redevelopment attempt, by former owner Liberty International, stalled in 2008 as a result of the financial crisis.

"It's no secret that the UK is oversupplied with retail space so it was quite a bold shout to embark on what is a near-1m sq ft development in that environment," says Scott Parsons, managing director, retail portfolio, at Landsec. "Getting planning permission for a development of this scale in one of the most historically and architecturally sensitive cities on the planet was an absolute coup."

What gave Landsec and The Crown Estate's proposals the edge over those that had been unsuccessful was that different sections of the mall were designed by different architects, each tasked with reflecting Oxford's heritage in their designs. In total, five architects worked on the project, drawing influences from the University of Oxford's colleges, the Bodleian Library and Campion Hall on nearby Brewer Street and consulting local people who didn't want just another

identikit concrete box as a shopping centre.

The Westgate Oxford Alliance prefers to describe its new scheme as a 'retail and leisure destination' rather than a shopping centre. It is certainly worlds apart from its predecessor.

## Unique perspective

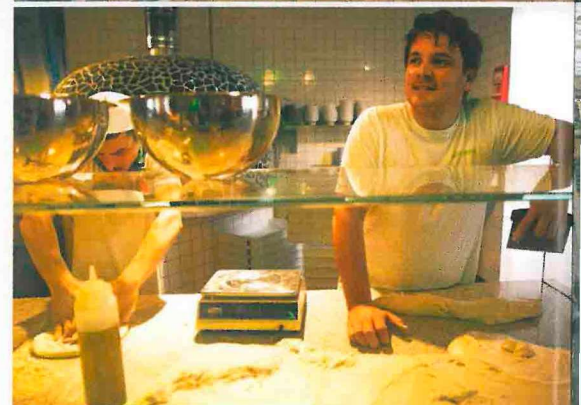
Boasting covered streets, arcades and squares linking with the surrounding roads, it also has an outward-facing roof terrace that gives visitors a unique perspective of Oxford's 'dreaming spires' and the rolling Oxfordshire hills that frame them.

Its two public squares, Leiden Square and Bonn Square, will play host to pop-up events and exhibitions. On opening day, the *Alice*-themed entertainment centred around the main atrium, Leiden Square, where an aerialist suspended under a giant balloon performed for the crowds beneath the curved glazed roof.

To see the scheme come to life is something Dominic Chambers, leasing manager, retail development, at Landsec, says local people have been waiting for "for a very, very long time".

"There were inevitably challenges in delivering a scheme this size in a city like Oxford but we've overcome them," he says. "We've delivered it on time and it's fantastically well let - we're really delighted with how it's turned out."

The quality of the environment was integral to the success of the leasing drive. Yes, there was pent-up demand for retail space in the city, but it had to be the right space, says Mark Disney, director of shopping centre leasing at CBRE, the letting agent on



the scheme, along with Cushman & Wakefield and, on the leisure side, Davis Coffey Lyons.

It seems Westgate has delivered. Although little more than half of the centre's 125 units were trading on opening day, many of the other retailers and leisure operators are currently fitting out and more than 90 units are expected to be occupied in time for Christmas.

The scheme is anchored by a 142,000 sq ft John Lewis, a Primark and a five-screen Curzon cinema and it boasts a diverse tenant mix of "everyday" fashion brands such as H&M, Superdry and Uniqlo, independent retailers and an aspirational offer that includes Hugo Boss, Reiss, Ted Baker, Russell & Bromley, Cos and Gant.

"Oxford had one of the most underserved catchments," says Disney. "There was this mismatch between the provision of retail and what the catchment expected. For such a historic city and one that has so many students

Oxford circus: the themed launch event featured an aerialist who performing under the curved glazed roof of the new shopping centre







and attracts so many tourists, the shopping experience was very poor. That was the fundamental basis for it - to bring a consistent and consummate offering that was appropriate for a city the size of Oxford."

### Next-generation dining

The food and beverage and leisure elements make up 17.5% of the lettable floorspace and will add 25 new restaurants to Oxford's food scene, many of which have chosen Westgate for their first venue outside London. There is a more formal and family-orientated dining offer on the roof terrace where brands include The Breakfast Club, Dirty Bones, Pizza Pilgrims, Sticks'n'Sushi, The Alchemist and Cinnamon Kitchen, a new concept by London's Cinnamon Club founder, Vivek Singh.

There are further, more informal dining options at Westgate Social on the lower floor. The "next-generation food court", as Disney describes it, is a similar concept to Trinity Kitchen at Landsec's Trinity Leeds in that it is a communal space where diners can choose from a variety of street-food vendors.

Brands include Mexican restaurant Benito's Hat, Shawa Lebanese Grill, Tommy's Burger Joint and Ned's Noodles.

Adding to the leisure component, Junkyard Golf Club (p15) - which will combine an edgy indoor golf course with five cocktail bars - will open later this month.

"We were very careful not to be too focused on premium," says Disney. "It has to have everyday appeal and to provide different things for different people at different times. The tenant mix at Westgate is incredibly difficult to deliver outside London."

Parsons adds: "Westgate does genuinely offer something for everyone. It will really add value to the city."

Disney describes Landsec and The Crown Estate's approach to leasing Westgate as "holistic" and "innovative". Leases are six to seven years on average

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**Scott Parsons, Landsec**

and are, according to Disney, similar to models that are common in international markets but rare in the UK. The aim is to allow flexibility over the tenant mix.

"That will lead to better customer experience through the retail mix, which leads to greater sales and converts into higher rents," says Disney. "The centre will evolve rather than stagnate."

He believes the opening of Westgate will cause a seismic shift in the perception of Oxford in the UK's regional hierarchy and will be a catalyst for the improvement of the rest of the city's retail offering.

For a city that has suffered from a less-than-adequate shopping experience for as long as anyone can remember, the arrival of Westgate looks set to be a game-changer. ■