

# #WOOLLIES15

WHAT WOOLWORTHS' STORES ARE NOW: 15 YEARS ON



GRAHAM SOULT  
January 2024



The former Woolworths in Maryport (store #618) – now Oak Tree Animals' Charity – still features the retailer's distinctive 1930s façade, alongside other familiar Woolies features: the doors, the white tiles, and the black granite

## CONTENTS

Research headlines .....	3	All sites demolished so far .....	22
What we've done .....	4	Concluding thoughts .....	26
Why does it matter? .....	4	The high street still isn't dead .....	26
A century on British high streets .....	4	...and nor is variety retailing .....	27
A distinctive built heritage .....	5	But change is happening .....	28
A retail property shock .....	5	The future is more mixed-use .....	29
A window on retail change .....	5	Woolworths as a magnifying glass .....	30
Research scope .....	6	Methodology .....	31
What's included .....	6	Clarifying the locations .....	31
...and what's not .....	6	Identifying and tracking occupants .....	32
Research findings .....	7	Upcoming uses .....	34
New retail occupants by type .....	7	Corrections since 2019 .....	34
New occupants by retailer .....	10	About Graham and CannyInsights.com .....	35
Vacancy and churn .....	13		
Subdivision of properties .....	16		
Out-of-town locations .....	17		
Non-retail commercial uses .....	18		
Housing developments .....	21		
Redevelopments .....	22		

Cover photos of former Woolworths – top row: Leven, Houghton-le-Spring, Chester-le-Street; second row: Deal, Horncastle, Waterloo (Merseyside); third row: Nailsea, Durham, Swindon; fourth row: St Andrews, Salisbury, Sandown; bottom row: Kingsbridge, Fort William, Workington. These and all other modern photographs in the report are by Graham Sault, taken during our site visits.

## RESEARCH HEADLINES



Ex-Woolworths, now Poundland, Canterbury (store #109)

### NEW RETAIL OCCUPANTS

- The vast majority of the 807 former Woolworths premises – 672 (83%) – remain entirely (627) or partly (45) in active use by other retailers, though this is down from 738 (91%) five years ago.
- About 40% of ex-Woolworths sites (324) house variety stores, like Poundland, B&M or Poundstretcher – so, retailers whose offer is similar to that previously provided by Woolworths.
- More than one in five Woolworths sites (176) now accommodate a grocery or convenience store, such as Iceland, Heron Foods, Tesco or Sainsbury's – exactly the same number as in 2019.
- Reflecting wider high street trends, the number of fashion stores in ex-Woolworths premises has fallen sharply from 124 in 2019 to 91 now.
- Indies are growing – 107 sites now house at least one small independent business, up from just 72 in 2019.
- The biggest single current occupant of ex-Woolworths sites, by far, is still Poundland with 134 – around a sixth of the estate. Iceland is next, with 71.
- At least 101 former Woolworths properties (13%) have been permanently subdivided to accommodate more than one new occupant, up from 89 in 2019.

### NON-RETAIL USES

- The number of ex-Woolworths sites in non-retail use has more than doubled in the last five years. Our research has identified 48 locations (6%) that are now wholly in non-retail use – up from 22 in 2019 – and another 50 that are non-retail in part (up from 23).
- Since 2019, non-retail uses have become increasingly diverse – especially around leisure and gaming.

- Types of non-retail uses highlighted in our 2019 report – and that have continued to see growth since then – include pubs, bars and restaurants (18), coffee shops (14), gyms (13), offices (eight), education and training (five), libraries (three), health centres (three), and dentists (three). There is also still an accountant, a function room, and a nursery.
- There has been a substantial increase in housing developments within former Woolworths locations. Our research has identified 18 ex-Woolworths sites (2%) already with a residential element – up from just five in 2019 – with at least 11 more planned.

### VACANCY AND CHURN

- 74 ex-Woolworths sites (9%) are fully vacant, all but one after previously being occupied. This is a notable increase on the 43 we recorded in 2019 and the 22 in 2014, but is well below the widely cited vacancy rate for UK high streets as a whole (just under 14%).
- Nearly a third of these fully vacant sites – 22 – are former Wilko (14) or M&Co (eight) stores that were only vacated in 2023 and have not been refilled yet.
- However, among what were once Woolworths sites, 12 ex-M&Co units and nine former Wilkos are already occupied again, demonstrating strong demand.
- Churn is a major factor – there are now 417 ex-Woolworths locations (52%) where the present occupants are different to those who took over the premises originally following Woolworths' closure – up from just 294 in 2019.
- On the other hand, it means that in 390 locations (48%), the business that moved in immediately after Woolworths' collapse 15 years ago is still trading there now – a surprising degree of stability.

### REDEVELOPMENT

- The number of demolished Woolworths stores now stands at 18 (2%), with at least another four in the pipeline. Though still relatively few, it represents a notable increase from the mere six recorded in 2019.

## JOIN THE CONVERSATION

Got a story to tell about Woolworths? Want to share a picture of your own local branch? Spotted a mistake in this report, or something that needs updating?

Head over to Twitter (X), Facebook, Instagram or LinkedIn and join the conversation using the hashtag **#Woolies15**. You can follow our tweets at **@soul** and **@cannynights**. Find this report online at **woolies15.co.uk**.



Former Woolworths, Whitehaven (store #253) – now Poundland and Farplace Animal Rescue

## WHAT WE'VE DONE

After Woolworths closed in January 2009, we identified the 807 locations from which it was trading immediately prior to its collapse.

Over 15 years, we have tracked subsequent occupants of these premises using a combination of our own site visits and detailed desk research. Each location's status was most recently checked between September and December 2023. You can read about the scope of our research on page 6, and our methodology on page 31.

This report is a substantially updated and expanded version of the #Woolies10 report that we published in January 2019, particularly highlighting key changes in the post-Woolworths landscape compared to five years ago.

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Fifteen years after all its stores closed, it's easy to question why we're *still* going on about Woolworths.

It's certainly the case that Woolworths is an important and remarkable part of the UK's retail history, despite no longer being with us.

And, even now, it's often named as the retailer people would most like to bring back from the dead.<sup>1</sup> When Woolworths closed, we didn't just lose a store – we lost a

source of comfort, and of familiarity across generations, that helped to underpin our sense of place and belonging.

## A CENTURY ON BRITISH HIGH STREETS

Woolworths was founded in the United States in 1878, and opened its first British store, in Liverpool's Church Street, on 5 November 1909. The retailer went on to be a fixture of UK high streets for nearly a century.

Across that period – allowing for all its openings, closures and relocations over the years – there are over 1,400 UK sites that at one time housed a Woolworths branch. We have so far visited and photographed 894 of them!



The very first UK Woolworths store (store #1), in Church Street, Liverpool, shown (centre) in a 1917 postcard. The store traded here until 1923, and then from across the street until 1983. A Clarks store now occupies the original site



1933 postcard showing a distinctive purpose-built Woolworths store in Chippenham on the left (store #493). The frontage was remodelled in the 1970s, and the store traded from this site until Woolworths' collapse

## A DISTINCTIVE BUILT HERITAGE

Woolworths built or redeveloped many of its own stores between the 1920s and 1970s, creating an architectural legacy – with plenty of distinctive features, if you know what to look for – that survives in large part to this day.

By the time of Woolworths' demise, its estate had shrunk to 807 stores – some way below the peak of over 1,100 reached in the late 1960s, but still a sizeable store network by the standards of modern British retailers.

## A RETAIL PROPERTY SHOCK

Going from 807 stores to none in just 40 days, Woolworths' closure released nearly 7.2 million square feet of retail sales area on to the market all at once – equivalent to the space of 2,500 Tesco Express shops or 63 John Lewis stores<sup>2</sup> – affecting cities, towns and suburbs in every part of the country.

It also, of course, resulted in 27,000 people losing their jobs, many of whom had a long and proud history of service at Woolworths.

No subsequent retail collapse – even that of BHS, which employed 11,000<sup>3</sup> when it closed in 2016, or Wilko, with 12,500 staff when it shut down in 2023<sup>4</sup> – has come close to Woolworths in terms of how many working lives it has impacted.

## A WINDOW ON RETAIL CHANGE

Our ongoing research allows us to not only report on what the 807 former Woolworths sites are now, but also to understand the change that has taken place as intervening occupants have opened and closed.

By looking at the former Woolworths estate in this way, we gain a unique snapshot of commercial property activity across the UK, and a window on how the country's retail landscape has changed over the past 15 years.



M&Co – pictured at Broughty Ferry's ex-Woolworths (store #1085) in 2021 – is a subsequent occupant that has itself now disappeared from the high street. The brand still trades online under new ownership, and has talked about a bricks-and-mortar return<sup>5</sup>

## RESEARCH SCOPE

### WHAT'S INCLUDED

In this research, we've looked at the 807 locations that Woolworths was trading from when it collapsed into administration on 26 November 2008, and that became vacant as a result of the business closing all its stores between 27 December 2008 and 6 January 2009.<sup>6</sup>

### ...AND WHAT'S NOT

Some sources, such as BBC News<sup>7</sup>, mistakenly refer to 815 stores. It's likely that this includes seven stores whose sale to Tesco was already agreed in October 2008<sup>8</sup>, and that had closed prior to Woolworths' collapse. Another store, Wood Green, had already shut on 13 September.

Earlier in 2008, Woolworths had also disposed of four large stores to Waitrose<sup>9</sup>, and exited other sites in York, Braehead, Luton, Tamworth Ventura and Broughton Park. These too are excluded from the present research.

On this basis, we haven't, of course, featured any other historic Woolworths locations either – another 600-plus sites that Woolworths opened and closed throughout its 99-year UK history.

Elsewhere, there are many places where Woolworths stores were shrunk in size over the years, with parts of sites hived off – mostly in the 1980s – to other retailers.



*In Barrow-in-Furness (store #242), Woolworths traded until the end in what is now Poundland, but also occupied Superdrug's section before that was split off in 1987. Hence, only the Poundland premises form part of the present research*

Superdrug – acquired by Woolworths in 1987 – especially grew this way; that's why so many latterday Woolworths still had Superdrug trading next door. Again, our research excludes any earlier divestments, and looks only at the reuse of space that Woolworths still occupied at the time of its collapse, including upper floors where applicable.

We have also omitted the planned store in Calne that Woolworths had intended to open by the end of 2009. That site ended up being occupied by M&Co instead, and then, since October 2023, by The Original Factory Shop.

Finally, our research also excludes Woolworths' eight trial concessions inside Somerfield stores (whose space would just have been reoccupied by Somerfield again).



*Calne is a "Woolworths that never was", which was under construction at the time of the chain's collapse and scheduled to open in the Wiltshire town in late 2009. While an interesting part of (almost) Woolworths history, it too falls outside the remit of the #Woolies15 research*



Wellworth It!, trading in the old Woolworths premises in Ledbury (store #696) since 2010, is one of the most notable independent businesses – and one of even fewer indies explicitly inspired by Woolworths – to enjoy sustained success in an ex-Woolies location

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### NEW RETAIL OCCUPANTS BY TYPE

- Trading from 324 locations (40%), the most common new use of ex-Woolworths sites is still **variety stores** – in short, retailers whose offer is similar to that of Woolworths, such as Poundland, Poundstretcher, B&M, Home Bargains and The Original Factory Shop.
- The modest net decline since 2019 – when variety stores occupied 350 former Woolworths locations – largely reflects the loss of 25 **Wilko** sites following that chain's collapse in 2023.
- More than one in five Woolworths sites (176) houses a **grocery** or convenience store – unchanged from 2019. Iceland (71), Heron Foods (28) Tesco (22) and Sainsbury's (14) still account for most of those.
- Of those 176 locations, almost one in ten houses an **international supermarket** – usually independently run, and specialising, for example, in Polish or Asian foods. International supermarkets now occupy 16 former Woolworths locations, more than half of those serving communities in Greater London.
- The number of **fashion** stores in ex-Woolworths premises – such as Peacocks (19), H&M (17), New Look (14) and TK Maxx (9) – has fallen sharply; they occupy 91 locations now, compared to 124 in 2019.
- Reflecting wider high-street trends, this drop is largely due to the demise of **M&Co** – which occupied 20 ex-Woolworths sites in 2019 – as well as other fashion brands, such as H&M, reducing the size of their estates.
- Against this backdrop, it is possible to see the logic of Poundland substantially growing the Pep&Co **clothing offer** within its own stores – including a large number of former Woolworths sites – to plug the gap that others' departures have left in many locations.
- We've only counted one **bookmaker** anywhere in the former Woolworths estate (down from two in 2019), occupying a small section of a subdivided store.



A temporary charity shop was occupying part of the old Woolworths in West Bromwich (store #112) when we visited in December 2023, following the closure of Bargain Buys (Poundworld) in 2018

- **Charity shops** remain one of the more transient uses across the former Woolworths estate. There are currently only 21, accounting for less than 3% of all ex-Woolworths sites. Another 15 locations have housed a charity shop at some point in the last 15 years.
- As the former Woolworths estate evolves, **small independent retailers** and businesses are growing in visibility. 107 sites are now fully or partly occupied by indies, compared to just 72 five years ago.
- However, at least another 58 sites have housed small independents at some point in the last 15 years but **no longer do so** – demonstrating the challenge for small businesses of making a go of these prominent, and often large and relatively expensive, premises.<sup>10</sup>
- In the immediate aftermath of Woolworths' demise, a slew of **independent variety stores** – including numerous variations on the pound shop format – popped up, many of which had already closed by our

2014 five-year audit. There are now 23 such stores across the estate, little changed from 2019.



After Store Twenty One closed, successful indie Charmed Interiors has traded from the old Woolworths site in Spalding (store #318) since 2018, upsizing from its previous location nearby

## CASE STUDY: ABERGELE – NOW BENNETTS INTERIORS



Woolworths opened a purpose-built store (#973) in the market town of Abergele, on the North Wales coast, on 31 July 1957, and the business traded at 28 Market Street for over half a century until its closure on 3 January 2009.

Later that year, the premises were filled by Wales-based independent discounter Diskos, offering a not dissimilar range of goods to its predecessor, including stationery, pet foods and household goods.

By 2013, the use of the premises had changed from retail to an independent gym, with a second local fitness operator later taking over. With the property once again empty in

2018, there was a planning application for change of use to a hot food takeaway, though this was refused.

After a period of several years vacant, the site's current occupant is local furniture and home décor store Bennetts Interiors, which opened in April 2022.

Owner Graham has done a really nice job of transforming the old Woolworths shopfloor – with all its subsequent layers of use – into a space with glamour and warmth. Even now, he told me, customers regularly go into the store and share their memories with him of when they used to shop there in the days of Woolies.



Combined Poundland and Pep&Co in the former Woolworths in Weston-super-Mare (store #81). This is one of six current Poundland stores in a former Woolworths originally taken over by clothing chain Ethel Austin, which itself collapsed in 2013

## NEW OCCUPANTS BY RETAILER

- The biggest current occupant of ex-Woolworths sites, by far, is still **Poundland**. It has 134 stores – around one in six of all locations – down from the 147 recorded in 2019.
- Only 50 of those 134 are sites that Poundland acquired directly after Woolworths' closure. The rest (84) have been **added later** after being occupied by someone else first, most notably through Poundland's 2015 acquisition of **99p Stores** (43 current sites), and by snapping up former Woolworths stores vacated in turn by retailers like Ethel Austin (6), TJ Hughes (3) and Carpetright (3).
- Since our 2019 report, Poundland has further evolved its estate by adding former Woolworths premises that were previously taken over by **M&Co** (4 sites) and, since October 2023, seven ex-Woolies that were vacated following the collapse of **Wilko**.
- Other than Poundland, the only retailers currently trading from more than 40 ex-Woolworths locations are **Iceland** (71), **B&M** (43) and **Poundstretcher** (42).
- Completing the **top ten** new occupants are Heron Foods (28), Home Bargains (24), The Original Factory Shop (23), Tesco (22), Peacocks (19) and H&M (17).
- **Peacocks** enters the top ten after the collapse of **Wilko**, which had 26 former Woolworths stores in 2019, but now only one (so far), following the reopening of the Exeter branch in December 2023.<sup>11</sup>



Poundland relocated to the old Woolworths in Ryde (store #244) in September 2023, after it was freed up by the closure of M&Co

- One of the biggest risers in terms of ex-Woolworths locations is discount chain **One Beyond**, which did not even exist at the time of our 2019 #Woolies10 report.
- Launched – originally as One Below – by the **founders of Poundworld** in March 2019, the business now trades from seven former Woolworths sites, having switched to a multi-price model from its original “everything £1 or less” format.
- Demonstrating the **churn** across the ex-Woolworths estate – with variety retailers regularly snapping up each other’s vacated sites – all seven One Beyond/Below stores were previous Poundworld (or Poundworld’s Bargain Buys fascia) locations, with three also having a post-Poundworld intervening use as Poundstretcher.



## TOP 10 NEW OCCUPANTS



Former Woolworths in Ramsgate (store #72) – initially 99p Stores and now Poundland

1		134	-13	12
2		71	-2	13
3		43	-12	14
4		42	+9	15
5		28	-1	16
6		24	+1	
7		23	-2	
8		22	-1	17
9		19	-1	
10		17	-5	

+/- figures show net change since 2019 report

Left: One Below (top) opened in the left-hand half of the former Woolworths in Regent Street, Swindon (store #38) in November 2019, taking over the empty Poundworld Plus (bottom, pictured after closure in 2019). Fashion retailer Peacocks trades from the other portion. The initial post-Woolworths tenant – before the property was subdivided – was BHS, which used the site for a temporary store while its main premises on The Parade were redeveloped

## CASE STUDY: NEWTON AYCLIFFE



Newton Aycliffe ex-Woolworths pictured in 2010, before improvements (top right) and with its intact sign in 2011 (top left). The lower three photos show Aycliffe Town Centre – including the former Woolworths, right – in December 2023

Opened as store #1007 in 1958, the Newton Aycliffe Woolworths served the expanding County Durham new town until its closure on 3 January 2009.

With the old Woolworths in Holyhead and Longton having each been occupied for a few months out of the last 15 years, and Kidderminster recently demolished, Newton Aycliffe is the last never-reoccupied store still standing – yet the town of 26,000 people is undoubtedly in better shape than many of the 806 places that *have* notched up at least one post-Woolies occupant.

Across nine visits from 2010 to 2023, I've seen Aycliffe evolve from the “tired and depressing” town centre I saw on my first trip to a place that had, by 2014, the air of somewhere “forward looking and cared for”.<sup>18</sup>

In a much-needed revamp of both the Woolworths building and the wider town centre, 2013 saw the old concrete ramp in Beveridge Way removed, investment in new

shopfronts, improvements to public realm, and the building of a new Aldi store. The Woolies store was even “under offer” for a time.

Sadly, no new tenant has signed up, despite Aycliffe having Tesco Extra right in the centre rather than out of town, free parking, and – if you look beyond the admittedly too many empty units – a still decent offer of indies, multiples and services, including one of the first UK Banking Hubs.<sup>19</sup>

After all that, Aycliffe's big gap is now its lack of hospitality offer; it has a new Costa, but – despite past hopes<sup>20</sup> – still no Wetherspoons, and only one town centre restaurant.

If the old Woolworths is to be filled in time for #Woolies20, the answer surely lies in food and drink.

Anyone interested should contact the agents, Smith Price RRG, who continue to market the property for rent.<sup>21</sup>



Former Woolworths in Coatbridge (store #252) in November 2023 – currently empty again after several previous independent occupants

## VACANCY AND CHURN

- 74 ex-Woolworths sites (9%) are **fully vacant**, all but one of those after previously being filled at least once. This is a **notable increase** on the 43 vacant sites recorded in 2019, and the 22 in 2014.
- However, the **proportion** of fully empty locations (9%) is well below the overall vacancy rate for UK high streets (just under 14%) – and, viewed another way, means that 91% of ex-Woolworths sites are still occupied.<sup>22</sup>
- In addition to the 74 fully vacant locations, our records suggest another 22 that are **empty in part** (where a former Woolworths has been subdivided to house multiple occupants, and at least one part is vacant).
- Of the 807 former Woolworths premises, our records show only one – **Newton Aycliffe** (see case study) – that has **never been reoccupied** at all over the last 15 years, compared to four in 2019 and seven in 2014.
- Even now, though, there is hope! Of the three other never-occupied Woolworths sites in 2019, **Margate**

now houses independent art school The Margate School<sup>23</sup>; **Kidderminster** was demolished in 2023<sup>24</sup>, with the site earmarked for a new urban park<sup>25</sup>; and **Longton** was briefly an independent discount store in 2020, but is now empty again with its Woolworths signage still intact (we do not count its two stints as a cannabis farm as official “uses”).<sup>26</sup>



In a lovely touch, the former Woolworths in Margate (store #192) – now The Margate School – celebrates the building’s retail past



After Woolworths' collapse, Wilko quickly took over the site in Maidenhead (store #202), pictured here in 2018. The store shut on 17 September 2023, after Wilko's own collapse, and was subsequently reopened as a Poundland less than a fortnight later

- A significant chunk of the 74 fully vacant ex-Woolworths sites are the result of two recent retail collapses involving subsequent occupants: **M&Co**, which closed all its stores by the end of April 2023, and still occupied 20 ex-Woolworths sites in 2019; and **Wilko**, which shut its last stores in October 2023, including 26 previous Woolworths locations.
- In total, the tally of 74 includes **eight** ex-M&Co sites that are yet to be reoccupied, as well as **14** former Wilko stores.
- However, given the speed with which ex-M&Co and Wilko premises have been filled so far, it is likely that 2024 will see the number of voids **shrink further**. Among what were once Woolworths sites, 12 ex-M&Co units and nine former Wilkos are already occupied again, demonstrating strong demand.
- Notably, Wilko's new owners, The Range, are targeting as many as 300 potential new stores, at least some of which could plausibly be **reopenings** of former Wilko stores in ex-Woolworths locations.<sup>27</sup>
- Indeed, **churn** is a major factor affecting the former Woolworths estate. There are now **417 locations** (52%) – up from just 294 in 2019 – where the present occupants are different to those who took over the premises originally following Woolworths' closure.

## VACANT ≠ AVAILABLE

Just because 74 ex-Woolworths are fully vacant, it does not mean they are all ready to move into – indeed, there may be reasons why they are *not* being marketed.

Of the 74, we know of **nine** that are either already let, under offer, or otherwise in negotiations, but with no confirmation yet of who the new occupant might be.

At least another **18** vacant sites are earmarked for redevelopment or rebuilding, including four that have already been demolished but where no new development has yet taken place.

Not including those already in negotiations, we have found online marketing particulars for another **17** sites.

This means there are **30** fully vacant ex-Woolworths – or 41% – for which we are unaware of any interest or plans, but where no marketing particulars exist either.

In some cases, the lack of marketing may, for example, be due to the last tenant entering administration, and the property not yet being back in the landlord's hands.

However, if there are empty properties that could be usefully occupied – but with no obvious means for prospective tenants to express their interest – that is clearly a problem for places that want to promote local enterprise and bring life back to vacant units.

- On the other hand, it means that in **390 locations** (48%), the business that moved in immediately after Woolworths' collapse 15 years ago is still trading there now. This shows a surprising degree of stability given all the change that has taken place in retail and on high streets in that time.
- Every location is **different**; while, as noted above, nearly half of ex-Woolworths sites have seen no change in 15 years, others have had a succession of short-term tenants. We have logged five locations that have had as many as **six previous occupants** each.
- Our tracking has recorded **655 former occupants** across the Woolworths estate over the last 15 years – up from 358 in 2019. These are businesses that have operated from all or part of an ex-Woolies site at some point since 2009, but that do not any more.
- Not surprisingly, the retailer to have occupied, and then disappeared from, most Woolworths sites is **99p Stores** (including Family Bargains), accounting for 64 of those 655. The majority of those sites were converted to Poundland upon its takeover of 99p Stores in 2015, with 43 still trading under a Poundland fascia now.
- Among the top ten former occupants, **Poundworld** (31), **Ethel Austin** (25), **M&Co** (21) and **Store Twenty One** (19) have also vanished from the high street entirely.
- However, we are also seeing increasing estate turnover even among **successful retailers**. For example, **Poundland** has now traded from and then exited 44 former Woolworths locations – up from 18 in 2019 – but, as noted, continues to acquire other ex-Woolies sites vacated by the likes of M&Co and Wilko, seizing the opportunity to expand in smaller towns, or to relocate to larger units than can showcase its full range.

- Other retailers are showing signs of bouncing back after earlier troubles. **Poundstretcher**, for instance, has shed 15 of the Woolworths locations it has traded from to date – some after its 2020 Company Voluntary Arrangement (CVA) – while still showing a net gain from 33 ex-Woolies sites in 2019 to 42 now. Much of this recent growth has come from taking over sites vacated by rivals such as Poundland, The Original Factory Shop and Poundworld.
- Similarly, fashion retailer **Peacocks** – initially one of the biggest takers of former Woolworths sites – ended up retrenching following its own collapses into administration in 2012 and 2020. Now growing again, it has recently opened stores in several ex-Woolworths premises that became vacant as a result of Store Twenty One or M&Co closing in turn.

TOP 10 PAST OCCUPANTS				
Which retail fascias have taken over, and then exited, the most former Woolworths sites, and why?				
1		64	Taken over by Poundland in 2015	28
2		44	Includes ex-99p Stores briefly converted, then closed, plus relocations and end-of-lease closures	
3		31	Collapsed in 2018, and disappeared from the high street	29
4		26	Collapsed in 2023, but store estate now being grown again by new owners The Range	
5		25	Collapsed in 2013, and disappeared from the high street	30
6		21	Collapsed in 2023, and disappeared from the high street (for now)	
7		19	Collapsed in 2017, and disappeared completely after brand was briefly revived by new owners	
8		18	Normal turnover of estate, often involving relocations to larger premises	
9=		15	Collapsed in 2012 and 2020, but business acquired and built back up by new owners both times	
9=		15	Some closures after 2020 CVA, but subsequent return to growth	



Poundland initially took over the old Woolworths in Deal (store #262); when it relocated to the nearby ex-M&S in 2022, Poundstretcher moved in to fill the gap

## OLD WOOLIES SIGNAGE



From their vertical white tiles to the ubiquitous black-granite stall risers, former Woolworths buildings offer no shortage of architectural clues to their past. Indeed, some of the richest stores from a heritage point of view are those that Woolworths vacated years ago.

Such stores obviously fall outside the scope of the #Woolies15 research, but in retail history terms they are sometimes the most interesting – partly because they missed out on later redevelopments that would have removed distinctive features.

For example, a few long-closed stores – such as Oldbury (#815) and Clay Cross (#870) – still feature largely intact entrance mosaics, while Glasgow Charing Cross (#121), shut over half a century ago, still has an amazing ‘F W Woolworth & Co. Ltd’ sign around the side.<sup>31</sup>

Traces of old Woolworths lettering also regularly reappear when subsequent occupants replace their signage or close down – as seen most recently, for example, in Carlisle, where the ex-B&M will soon form part of a new University of Cumbria campus.<sup>32</sup>

However, if you’re looking for an in-situ modern Woolworths sign that was still in use at the time of the retailer’s collapse, your options are limited to two stores that have only ever been very briefly occupied.

**Holyhead** (above) still has its rear signage, pending a planned hotel redevelopment; and **Longton** retains all its Woolworths fascias. Alternatively, head to the Ludo Lounge café-bar in **Southbourne**, where the re-use of the ex-Woolworths has incorporated an old Woolies sign from the building into the roof terrace; or to **Margate** (see page 13), where the current use retains and celebrates the Woolworths lettering.

Right: Heron Foods initially took the left-hand two thirds of the ex-Woolworths in Ashington (store #229), before then reunifying the ground floor in 2018 by expanding into the rest

## SUBDIVISION OF PROPERTIES

- At least **101** former Woolworths properties – 13% – have been **permanently divided up** to accommodate more than one new occupant; up from 89 in 2019.
- Of those, most (69) have been **divided into two**, though in one case – Birmingham Small Heath – the large 52,187 sq ft total area of the former Woolworths (a previous Big W) has been split **seven** ways.
- In total, the 101 subdivided ex-Woolworths properties now comprise a total of **261** separate premises.
- Six ex-Woolworths properties that were initially subdivided have subsequently been **merged** back together again, to accommodate the needs of new or expanding occupants.
- For the purposes of this research, a **subdivided property** is a former Woolworths that has been permanently carved up to house more than one occupant. Such divisions usually involve splitting the frontage into two or more sections; hiving off different floors (such as creating space for a first-floor gym above ground-floor retail); or, in the case of some shopping centres, splitting an ex-Woolworths into front and back sections facing different malls or streets.
- Two businesses trading under a **dual fascia** within a shared space – such as Poundland and Pep&Co – are not included within the count of subdivided properties.



## OUT-OF-TOWN LOCATIONS



The former Woolworths in Cheetham Hill, Manchester (store #1253) – previously a Big W – has recently been extensively remodelled to accommodate Lidl, Sports Direct and B&M

- Though Woolworths was predominantly a “high-street retailer”, it did have **18 retail park or retail shed stores** at the time of its collapse, 16 of which had been built in the late 1990s and early 2000s as Big W.<sup>33</sup> Historically, though, Woolworths traded from quite a few more out-of-town locations (see panel, right).
- These 18 retail park and retail shed sites formed just 2% of Woolworths’ 807-strong store count at the time of closure, but accounted for 11% of the chain’s total **retail sales area**, and 12% of the annual **rent bill**.
- Given the large size of the 16 ex-Big W stores – all at least 31,000 sq ft – it’s not surprising that seven have been **divided up** to accommodate more than one new occupant. The ex-Big W in Newark, for instance, now houses Home Bargains, Boots, Next and Peacocks.
- Only four different retailers have managed to fill one or more of the 16 ex-Big Ws **by themselves**: Boundary Mill Stores (1), Tesco (2), Asda (2)<sup>34</sup>, and The Range (4).



The Range took over the whole of the ex-Woolworths at Milton Link, Edinburgh, opening in 2014 after several years vacant (store #1208)

## AN OUT-OF-TOWN PIONEER

# WOOLCO

DEPARTMENT STORES

a new fashion  
in modern  
retailing

A Division of F. W. WOOLWORTH and Co., Limited



Cover of a late 1960s brochure championing Woolco

Woolworths pioneered the hypermarket concept in the UK when its then US owners brought Woolco “department stores” to Britain in 1967.<sup>35</sup> This concept of huge destination stores, with ample free parking, was totally new to British shoppers at that time.

All 14 Woolcos were disposed of by 1986, with some performing a similar function today as branches of Asda.

In 1999, however, Woolworths’ then owner Kingfisher Group made a return to large out-of-town sites with the launch of Big W, a concept combining products from Woolworths with those of Kingfisher’s other retail fascias: Comet, B&Q and Superdrug.

Unfortunately, the demerger of Kingfisher’s various businesses in the early 2000s meant that existing Big Ws had to be reworked to become unusually huge branches of Woolworths. Eight of 24 ex-Big W sites were already disposed of to Asda, Tesco or M&S in the mid-2000s, while the rest – sometimes downsized, and now bearing a normal Woolworths fascia – traded until the company’s closure in 2008-09.

With a sales area of 80,827 sq ft, the Rotherham Catcliffe ex-Big W was easily the biggest Woolworths at the time of the firm’s collapse, while the slightly smaller Stockton Portrack Lane branch was the most expensive, with an annual rent bill of £1,339,307.

## NON-RETAIL COMMERCIAL USES



The Ludo Lounge bar on the site of Southbourne's ex-Woolworths (store #606) incorporates a fragment of its predecessor into the design of the new roof terrace

- Of the 807 Woolworths locations vacated after its collapse, it is remarkable that the vast majority – 672 (83%) – remain entirely (627) or partly (45) in **active use by other retailers**.
- This nonetheless represents a decline from the 738 premises in active retail use (91%) five years ago – partly due to the larger number of sites that are presently vacant, and an increase in **non-retail** uses.
- Indeed, the number of Woolworths sites turned over to **non-retail uses** of one form or another has more than doubled in the last five years. Our research has identified 48 locations (6%) that are now wholly in non-retail use – up from 22 in 2019 – and another 50 that are non-retail in part (up from 23).

- Among the most prominent types of non-retail uses, the number of **coffee shops** in former Woolworths premises has slightly increased from 11 in 2019 to 14 now; seven of those are Costa. In all but three of these locations, coffee shops occupy just part of a subdivided Woolworths site, reflecting the large size of many of the stores that were vacated when the chain collapsed.
- **Restaurants, bars and pubs** still account for a surprisingly small number of ex-Woolworths sites – 18, or 2% – up from 15 in 2019. A further two sites now accommodate **hotels**, with at least four more planned.
- As in 2019, pub chain **Wetherspoon** still trades from five former Woolworths locations. It is now being challenged by **Loungers** – the operator of Lounge café-bars – which has expanded from two former Woolworths sites in 2019 to five now, taking space vacated by M&Co (Buckingham), The Original Factory Shop (Wells) and Pizza Express (St Ives in Cornwall).
- Three Woolworths sites in the South East – Southsea, Sheerness and Rye – are still now occupied by **libraries**. All three combine library provision with a council customer service point on the high street.



A Wetherspoon pub – The Fair O'Blair – occupies the ex-Woolworths in Blairgowrie (store #1098)

- The number of **gyms** housed in former Woolworths sites has increased slightly from ten in 2019 to 13 now. Some of these occupy upper floors used as stockrooms and staff areas in Woolworths' time, though recent openings – like PureGym in Swiss Cottage – are increasingly filling prime ground-floor space too.
- There are now more **offices** too – in eight ex-Woolworths locations, compared to just two in 2019 – most usually on upper floors but in a few cases at street level. For example, the former Woolworths in Girvan – mostly empty since 2009 – has been recently converted into six self-contained business units, while Newry's houses consultancy firm FD Technologies.



Stroud's ex-Woolworths (store #63), captured in 2013 as 99p Stores, 2018 as Poundland, and 2022 after its transformation into a health centre

- Other types of non-retail use highlighted in our 2019 #Woolies10 report have continued to see a **modest increase** in numbers since then.
- These include **education and training** (five), **health centres** (three), and **dentists** (three). There is also still an accountant, a function room, and a nursery.
- The former Woolworths in **Stroud**, for instance, is now, since November 2022, the Five Valleys Medical Practice on the upper floors, with Starbucks at ground level, after initially housing 99p Stores and then Poundland after Woolworths' closure.
- The building's transformation, by the new owners of the adjacent Five Valleys shopping centre, has not only brought vacant upper levels back into **productive use**, but has also helped generate more animation at street level, as well as greatly enhancing the property's aesthetic contribution to the surrounding historic townscape.
- At the same time, the *range* of other **non-retail uses** across the ex-Woolworths estate has become increasingly **diverse** since 2019 – especially around **leisure and gaming**.



Sandbox VR, which opened in 2023 at Birmingham's Grand Central – the centre was known as The Pallasades when Woolworths still traded there

- Eye-catching subsequent additions include the virtual reality experience **Sandbox VR** replacing fashion chain Select at Birmingham's Grand Central; "booze and ball games" venue **Roxy Lanes** opening in Cheltenham's former New Look; and wizard golf attraction **The Hole in Wand** taking part of an ex-Poundland in Blackpool.
- Elsewhere, the former Woolworths store at Lewisham Shopping Centre became vacant again in 2019 when initial occupant H&M upsized into the nearby ex-BHS. The premises now house the **Migration Museum**, a fascinating project that "explores how the movement of people to and from Britain across the ages has made us who we are – as individuals and as nations".<sup>36</sup>



Right: The former Woolworths in Cheltenham (store #1187) with its initial post-Woolies occupant, fashion retailer New Look, in 2016, and as gaming venue Roxy Lanes in 2023

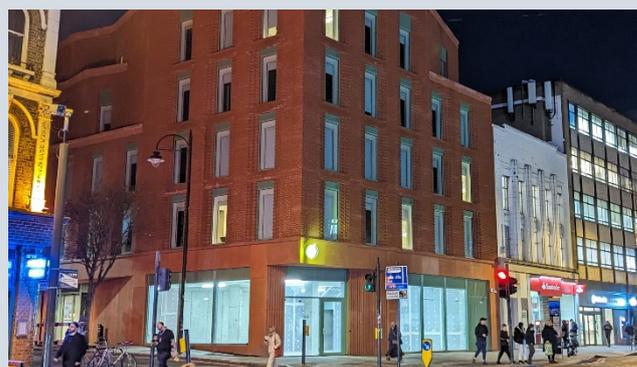


Initially taken over by supermarket Iceland after Woolworths' closure, the site in Ormskirk (store #793) – pictured here in October 2023 – has more recently been undergoing a transformation into student housing, with two reconfigured shop units being retained at ground level

## HOUSING DEVELOPMENTS

- Since 2019, there has been a **substantial increase** in housing developments within former Woolworths locations. Our research has found 18 sites (2%) already with a **residential element**, up from just five in 2019.
- Some schemes, such as at Seaton, Merthyr Tydfil and Ormskirk, have involved **repurposing vacant upper floors** for flats, alongside retained ground-floor retail.
- Others, like Mill Hill, Dorking and Tooting, have seen **new-build extensions** above or behind existing buildings to create additional space for housing.
- Some Woolworths sites are now being **completely redeveloped** for housing. On top of the 18 existing schemes, at least a further 11 sites (compared to five in 2019) have housing developments planned, with four properties already demolished in advance of building work commencing.

Right: Initially Sports Direct, Camden's ex-Woolworths (store #329) has been redeveloped as a hotel, retail, and a small number of flats





The former Woolworths in Lee Green (store #1110) – currently still a Sue Ryder charity shop, and photographed here after hours – is expected to disappear when the Leegate shopping centre is redeveloped

## REDEVELOPMENTS

- Though still a small proportion of the total estate, we have now counted 18 former Woolworths (2%) that have been **demolished** – up from just six in 2019.
- At least four more sites are **earmarked for demolition** and redevelopment. These include Holyhead, where the site is still being marketed for sale as an “exciting hotel development opportunity” with full planning consent<sup>37</sup>; Lee Green, where a housing-led redevelopment of the dated Leegate shopping centre is planned<sup>38</sup>; St Helens, where the Hardshaw Centre is expected to be demolished as part of a town centre regeneration scheme<sup>39</sup>; and Bristol, where the Galleries shopping centre may close this year or next.<sup>40</sup>
- **Kidderminster (#245):** Never occupied after Woolworths’ collapse, the building has been demolished along with some of its neighbours, with a new urban park to be created in its place.
- **Aldershot (#248):** 99p Stores and then Poundland traded here post-Woolworths, but the building has now been demolished as part of the Union Yard regeneration scheme being led by Rushmoor Borough Council.<sup>42</sup>

## ALL SITES DEMOLISHED SO FAR

- **West Ealing (store #239):** Taken over by Poundworld after Woolworths’ closure, the building – described as an “art deco gem”<sup>41</sup> – has been demolished to make way for a planned residential tower block.



Aldershot store in 2019 – with ghost sign – prior to demolition



In Stockton-on-Tees, work is progressing on turning the site of the demolished Castlegate shopping centre (December 2023 photos, bottom left and top) into a new urban park. B&M – pictured in 2021 – which occupied the old Woolworths, has now relocated to the ex-M&S nearby

- **Redcar (#275):** The site of the former Woolworths and adjacent ex-M&S is being replaced by a new “family-focused entertainment venue”, funded by a £25m Town Deal, and will also improve pedestrian connections between the High Street and seafront. Prior to demolition, variety stores Yorkshire Trading Company and then Goodwins occupied the former Woolworths.<sup>43</sup>
- **Camden Town (#329):** The ex-Woolworths unit was initially taken over by Sports Direct. The property has now been replaced by a new-build Hub by Premier Inn hotel, alongside ground-level retail and three social rented homes.<sup>44</sup>
- **Stockton-on-Tees (#336):** Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council acquired both the town’s shopping centres, facilitating the relocation of businesses from the busy but dated Castlegate – which included B&M in the former Woolworths – into the newer but emptier Wellington Square. Now demolished, the site of Castlegate will become Stockton Waterfront, “an urban park with open, flexible spaces for community, large-scale events for people of all ages to enjoy”.<sup>45</sup>



The former Woolworths in Tavistock in 2017 – subsequently demolished

- **Chingford Mount (#526):** Taken over by 99p Stores and then Poundland, the property was destroyed by fire in 2017 and demolished a few years later. Now a cleared site, our research has not found any specific plans.<sup>46</sup>
- **Orpington (#532):** One of few sites with six post-Woolworths fascias – albeit four of them as variants of Poundworld – the property was demolished in August 2023. A development of 40 apartments – to be called The Crofton – and a ground-floor restaurant, run by a local independent operator, will replace it.<sup>47</sup>
- **Hoddesdon (#565):** One of the earliest demolitions after Woolworths' closure, the entire Tower Centre made way for a new Morrisons store.<sup>48</sup>
- **Dunstable (#571):** After spells as an independent supermarket and then a Londis store, the former Woolworths was demolished in 2017. It has been replaced by Queen Katherine's Court, an attractive development of one to two bedroom apartments, alongside two ground floor retail units, both of which are occupied by independent businesses – one a dessert parlour, the other a prom dress specialist.<sup>49</sup>
- **Tavistock (#621):** After Woolworths' closure, the property in Brook Street was swiftly taken over by Fashion Direct and later Shoe King. It was demolished in 2021, with plans for a retail and housing development<sup>50</sup>, though as of November 2023 there has been no sign of any progress on site.<sup>51</sup>
- **South Oxhey (#828):** The ex-Woolworths initially became a Nisa Extra, but now the whole area has been redeveloped – including 500 homes and new-build retail – as part of a £150m regeneration scheme.<sup>52</sup>
- **Bracknell (#1040):** After a spell as a British Heart Foundation charity shop, the former Woolworths – and all the surrounding Broadway area – was demolished in 2013 to make way for the Lexicon town centre redevelopment scheme.<sup>53</sup>
- **West Byfleet (#1094):** The old Woolworths in Station Approach was split to accommodate Costa and Lloyds Pharmacy. The whole of the 1960s Sheer House scheme was then demolished in 2020, with work ongoing to construct Botanical Place, a new “mixed-use retirement-led community”.<sup>54</sup>



*The former Woolworths at Filton in 2011 – subsequently demolished and replaced by Asda*

- **Corstorphine (#1100):** Post-Woolworths, this store in an Edinburgh suburban parade had several different tenants in turn, including Bensons for Beds, Bed Shed, Evolution Furniture, and latterly Cats Protection. Following demolition in 2023, the planned new building will accommodate 35 homes and four retail units.<sup>55</sup>
- **Elephant & Castle (#1104):** The Woolworths site in the iconic London shopping centre was taken over by footwear retailer Clarks as a factory outlet store. The whole shopping centre was demolished in 2021, with major work on a new town centre – including housing, shops, leisure, education, and improved transport connections – due to complete in 2026.<sup>56</sup>
- **Blackburn (#1209):** Blackburn was a Woolworths store that had only opened in 1999, taking the place of the town's former C&A. Shortly after the store's closure, the whole Cobden Court section of the Mall Blackburn was demolished, and replaced by the Primark-anchored extension that exists today.
- **Filton (#1223):** Originally built as a Big W at Abbey Wood Retail Park, the store was reduced in size and

rebranded as Woolworths – with the surplus space becoming TJ Hughes – in 2005, a few years before Woolworths' collapse. After several years vacant the building was demolished, with a purpose-built Asda opening in its place in 2013.



*An extension to The Mall, photographed here in 2014, sits roughly where the old Blackburn Woolworths used to be*



Though the vast majority of former Woolworths buildings still exist, and remain in use, a growing number – such as Orpington, pictured here in 2021 and demolished 2023 – are making way for redevelopment

**“Fifteen years after closure, more than four fifths of Woolworths premises are still in active retail use – but the growth in non-retail uses, including leisure and housing, is the big trend compared to five years ago.”**

**Graham Soutl**

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

### THE HIGH STREET STILL ISN'T DEAD...

Back in 2019, I argued that “the findings from the #Woolies10 research paint a more positive picture of the high street than many might be expecting”, and the same is undoubtedly true five years later – despite the myriad of challenges that both businesses and consumers face.

A lot has happened in those last five years – not least the Covid pandemic, rampant inflation, eye-watering energy bills for homes and businesses, and the collapse of a succession of familiar bricks-and-mortar retail names. Debenhams, Topshop, M&Co and Wilko are among the casualties since 2019 – though all those brands have been resurrected in one form or another.

**Against that backdrop, it is remarkable that more than four fifths of ex-Woolworths sites still remain in active retail use, some 15 years later.**

One of the frustrations I often express on social media is the way in which sections of the British media seem to get fixated with pushing the “death of the high street” narrative – churning out stories about everything that is already shut, about to close, or worse than it used to be. Positive news – of which there is genuinely much to report upon, if only you open your eyes and your mind – tends to get rather less attention than it deserves.

So, I hope this report can be a reminder that we should all spend a bit more time celebrating and telling the stories of those businesses that are even now investing in our town, city and local centres – from the big names like Poundland, Iceland or B&M, to the growing number of independents that are taking root and enjoying success in former Woolworths premises.

As I always argue, no high street is improved by obsessing about everything we dislike. Rather, by appreciating and understanding more about what is already good and successful, we stand a better chance of facilitating even more change for the better.



Nailsea (store #1269) was a location that Woolworths only opened in 2007, a year before its collapse. The Original Factory Shop took over, then closed in 2018 to make way for Poundstretcher's Bargain Buys; when that shut in turn, TOFS moved back

## ...AND NOR IS VARIETY RETAILING

When Woolworths collapsed, many observers cited its eclectic business model – with the famous pick and mix sitting alongside ranges such as toys, stationery, household goods and children's clothing – as a factor in its demise.

Then what happened? Former Woolworths stores were immediately filled by a succession of competitor businesses doing much the same thing.

Overall, the #Woolies15 research shows that the number of variety stores is slightly down on five years ago – partly due to taking 25 ex-Wilko sites out of the equation.

**Yet, pick any of the 807 former Woolworths locations at random, and there's still a 40% chance you'll end up looking at a variety retailer such as Poundland, B&M, Poundstretcher, The Original Factory Shop, or Home Bargains.**

The point I made five years ago is therefore worth repeating. The continued success of these rival discounters – with at least some of their growth and success coming specifically off the back of Woolworths' demise – is a reminder that shoppers actually like the convenience of buying various everyday products in one place.

Rather, one of Woolworths' biggest problems in its latter years was that it got itself marooned in a mid-market graveyard – seen as being neither the cheapest nor the best quality, and therefore placed in mortal danger as it was usurped by more modern and agile competitors.

It's a story we see in retail all the time: a much-loved brand, once exciting and brave, taking its eye off the ball as nippier rivals emerge – and, eventually, finding itself in a situation that it's impossible to recover from.

The loss of that hard-won value reputation – which underpinned the very first “nothing over 6d” Woolworths stores, and sustained the company for much of its life thereafter – was almost certainly one of the biggest factors in the firm's decline and fall.

Crucially, the new generation of variety retailers not only have a clearer value proposition that appeals to the savvy consumer, but also benefit from more attractive and flexible lease terms than Woolworths had in its latter years.

With an annual rent bill of £125m at the time of closure – and 197 leases that still wouldn't have expired even now – there's no wonder Woolworths found it tough going.



Poundland traded from half of the former Woolworths in South Shields (store #104) until 2020, with Bonmarché moving in afterwards. Poundland returned to South Shields in 2023, when it took over the much larger ex-Wilko site nearby

Compare that to now. Woolworths traded in many of the same premises for over 50 years; in contrast, if it cannot strike a competitive deal, Poundland thinks nothing of exiting or moving locations after five.

Indeed, when fellow variety store Wilko collapsed and closed in 2023, there was genuinely a sense that history was repeating itself. Here was a much-loved and still-useful retailer that many consumers felt had got too expensive, and was operating from high-rent locations it had often occupied for decades – all at the same time as poor product availability was forcing loyal customers to frequent its rivals.

It's no wonder that The Range saw the value in snapping up Wilko's good bits – the brand, the online presence and the goodwill – while planning to rebuild the store estate in a way that better reflects the modern realities of trading.

Going full circle, many of the former Woolworths sites acquired by the old Wilko – often well-positioned units in shopping centres – should be ripe for reopening as Wilko 2.0 regrows its store presence under new ownership.

In contrast, though Poundland, B&M and Iceland all now occupy slightly fewer Woolworths sites than they did five years ago, it should not be seen as a sign that they are turning their backs on bricks and mortar. On the contrary,

it is often because they are relocating to larger premises from which they can showcase more of what they offer and serve customers better. In many cases, this is freeing up still-attractive spaces for other operators to occupy in turn.

## BUT CHANGE IS HAPPENING

Given that the day-to-day work of CannyInsights.com is all about championing and supporting retailers – and working in partnership to curate more successful places – you'd hardly expect me *not* to be optimistic about the high street's prospects. And I'm proud that this report helps shine a light on so many success stories.

**Nevertheless, the scale of change taking place on the high street, which was already apparent five years ago, is only going to accelerate. This will present challenges, as it always has done, but also exciting opportunities to reinvent and improve our places.**

Retail has evolved for as long as it has existed, and will forever keep doing so. However, as I often highlight in talks I give about the state of the high street, there is a sense that the pace of change has quickened, and become more disorientating, in the last decade or two.



Post-Woolies, the store in Cliftonville (#564) started life as an independent carpet and flooring shop – now it's a nursery

An unpalatable combination of factors – business rates, the growth of online retail, competition from out-of-town retail parks, and subdued consumer confidence, all then amplified by the effects of Covid – have picked off those businesses that are not at the top of their game.

With that in mind, we cannot overlook the former Woolworths premises that are *not* currently fortunate enough to be occupied.

While still a low number – and with especially few properties that have been vacant in the long term – the number of presently empty Woolworths sites is notably higher than in 2019, and higher again than when we took a similar snapshot from our research data ten years ago.

Even now, though, it is positive to see how readily many vacated sites are being refilled by other retailers, with established chains like Poundstretcher, and emerging players such as One Beyond, seizing the opportunity for expansion.

The demand for former M&Co and Wilko units in ex-Woolworths locations – roughly half of which are now occupied again after both retailers collapsed in 2023 – is especially encouraging.

## THE FUTURE IS MORE MIXED-USE

**While retail is, and will remain, an important feature of the high street, our local, town and city centres are increasingly becoming about more than just shopping – and the ex-Woolworths estate offers a rich and insightful snapshot of those trends.**

Back in 2019, I wrote that “the next decade *will* see more former Woolworths properties being repurposed for functions other than retail”.

Nevertheless, the doubling in non-retail uses across the ex-Woolworths estate compared to five years ago – albeit from a low base – is notable. The growth in housing developments – up to 18 existing and 11 planned now, from just five and five in 2019 – is particularly remarkable.

The growing appetite for redeveloping old Woolworths sites is undoubtedly linked to what is happening with the existing tenants of those properties.

As noted earlier, many vacated Woolworths premises were swiftly reoccupied by expanding national chains, and many landlords will have been pleased to do deals that kept the lights on and the rental income (if probably less than before) still flowing.



Plans for student housing at the former Woolworths and Wilko in Bognor Regis (store #344) – pictured here in 2019 – were being discussed even before the store's 2023 closure

In the past five years, however, a significant number of ex-Woolworths sites – 123, in fact – have seen the departure of their original and, up until then, *only* post-Woolies occupant.

**With so many properties vacant for the first time in more than a decade, it is not surprising that the owners of these ex-Woolworths buildings are using that opportunity to explore more radical repurposing.**

We can see other commercial property owners making pre-emptive plans, looking at options even before the present occupant departs – or, in some instances, developing schemes that can be set in motion once the current tenancy ends.

Five years ago, I wrote that “as town and city centres increasingly look to reinvent themselves as busy, multi-functional places – rather than merely shopping destinations – we will likely see more creative reuse that not only makes empty space productive again, but also helps build the vibrant communities needed to sustain the retained retail offer”.

As more mixed-use schemes take shape in the next five years, the former Woolworths estate has potential to be an exemplar in showing us how we can make this change.

## WOOLWORTHS AS A MAGNIFYING GLASS

As this report has sought to demonstrate through its insights and examples, the 807 former Woolworths stores – perhaps uniquely for any such retailer – cover the full

variety of types, sizes and locations of towns, cities and local centres across the whole UK.

**Tracking the changes that have happened in these stores over the last 15 years is like holding up a magnifying glass to the high street as a whole.**

We can see how agile, well-run retail businesses that give customers a great experience, and the products and services they want – whether those are national chains or, increasingly, independents – will continue to do well, even as they navigate the inevitable challenges.

In parallel, the evident growing trend for much more diverse high-street uses – including leisure, healthcare, education, and, certainly, housing – is fascinating. Commentators have often talked about the idea of modern high streets as “community hubs”, and now those observations are becoming reality.

Retail is, and will continue to be, a core part of the offer in our towns and cities. Nevertheless, it is clear that we must also think increasingly creatively about how we bring underused buildings and sites back into productive, sustainable use.

All of us with an interest and stake in the places we care about have a role to play, together, in driving that positive change.

**The boring, mono-use clone town may be a thing of the past – but local, distinctive, diverse high streets are much more alive than we give them credit for.**



Former Woolworths in Longton, Stoke-on-Trent (store #258) in June 2021 – one of only two stores with its Woolworths signage still intact. Nearby, however, Longton Exchange shopping centre is successfully building a rich indie offer, alongside hosting its first Artisan Market in October 2023

## METHODOLOGY

Through our tracking research over the last 15 years, we have sought to provide not only the most robust review yet of what Woolworths stores are now, but also a detailed understanding of the hundreds of intervening uses, thereby shedding light on how Britain's retail centres are changing.

Providing a detailed account of how we have carried out the research ensures that the strengths and limitations of our methods are transparent, and lets those who are reading and reporting upon the research draw their own conclusions about its accuracy and rigour.

Undertaking this research is more complex than you might imagine; the key stages involved are described below.

### CLARIFYING THE LOCATIONS

As noted in the Scope section (page 6), the research has looked at the 807 standalone stores from which Woolworths was trading at the time of its collapse.

Fortunately, the excellent Woolworths Museum website makes available a full store list from late 2008 in spreadsheet format<sup>57</sup> – produced just before Woolworths

fell into administration – listing all these branches and their addresses, as well as the seven stores (excluded from the research) that had just been closed and sold to Tesco.

We also procured a further spreadsheet, provided to prospective occupants of former Woolworths stores, which includes the address details of each store alongside extra information such as square footage and rent.

In addition, we have had access to Woolworths store lists from 1957, 1972, 1993 and 1995, which are useful for identifying historic Woolworths locations, but less relevant when focusing on the 2008 estate.

Having obtained the addresses of all the properties being researched, the next step was not as simple as merely Googling those addresses to see what they had subsequently become.

For example, around half of Woolworths stores ended up straddling multiple building numbers – such as 232-240 High Street in Gateshead – often reflecting the way that stores expanded to occupy multiple plots over time.

This means that the addresses for specific stores cited in online sources and in Woolworths' own records are rarely consistent with each other.



Divided between several occupants, and with no visual clues to its past use, Doncaster's former Woolworths (store #193), in the Frenchgate shopping centre, pictured here in 2021, demonstrates the complexity of some locations. The two-level store was originally reoccupied mostly by Clas Ohlson, with Deichmann and Wilko (extending its existing store) also taking first-floor space. After Clas Ohlson closed, Toys R Us, and then The Entertainer, took the newly released first-floor space, with TK Maxx moving into the ground-floor section.

Other potential confusion occurs when stores are listed in different places with both shopping centre and street addresses, or where shopping centres have changed their name since Woolworths' occupancy (such as ShoppingCity in Runcorn, which was still known as Halton Lea at the time of Woolworths' demise).

Additionally, the subdivision of ex-Woolworths properties can result in additional building numbers, particularly where those newly created units front different streets. At the same time, subdivision can also result in several businesses with the same address, such as where upper or basement floors have been split off from ground-floor retail use.

Ultimately, the only way to ensure that the right properties are being tracked is to use a combination of site visits and detailed desk research to identify all the precise premises from which Woolworths was trading when it collapsed.

Over the course of our project, we have visited 529 of the 807 ex-Woolworths locations in person at least once, and many of them multiple times.

Other locations have been clarified using Google Street View (which, conveniently, began capturing data in 2008, just before Woolworths' demise)<sup>58</sup>, and by referencing pre-2009 documents such as letting particulars, shopping centre mall guides and planning applications.

Input from people familiar with former Woolworths premises, often communicated to us via email or Twitter, has also proved invaluable.

## IDENTIFYING AND TRACKING OCCUPANTS

With the precise location and extent of all the former Woolworths sites pinned down at the beginning, the next stage has been to track and record the subsequent occupants of those premises over 15 years.

Having initially maintained informal records, we created our own database of all the stores in 2010. Since then, we have updated it every time we have become aware of a new occupant, gathering information through our own site visits, by monitoring news stories and social media, and through our own followers alerting us to changes.

Since its introduction in 2014, Google's historical Street View function (where users can click the "see more dates" link to view archived imagery from previous visits) has also been helpful for verifying intervening uses, though the gaps between Google's cycles mean, of course, that some of the shorter-term occupants are never captured.

In addition, a full check of all 807 sites was undertaken in 2013 prior to the fifth anniversary of Woolworths' collapse, once again between October and December 2018 for the #Woolies10 report, and most recently between September and December 2023 for the current update.

Many multiple retailers maintain online store locator tools, which make it relatively simple to check that a store in a given location continues to trade. Even here, however, there is a need for caution, as the information provided is not always wholly up to date.



Pictured here in 2022, Burnley's ex-Woolworths (store #160) has seen the joint highest number of superseded post-Woolworths occupants, with six. After housing a YMCA charity shop (in the whole unit), it has seen Peacocks and then Poundworld in one half, and 99p Stores, Poundland and then Wilko in the other. Iceland currently trades in the former Poundworld section – based on past demand, the ex-Wilko should not be empty long

Iceland, in particular, tends not to delete the pages for its closed stores, with only the implausible “12:00AM - 12:00AM” opening times to indicate that a featured branch is in fact defunct.

For smaller independent businesses, many of which even now have a more limited online footprint, it can be hard for us (or, indeed, potential customers) to verify that they are still trading; in some cases, the only way to be certain is to pay a visit, or pick up the phone!

Google Street View provides some clues, but its imagery is usually, at best, several months behind the present, and tends to exclude shopping centres and pedestrianised streets.

Similarly, the presence of a company website does not mean that a business is still live; often these sites hang around long after a business has closed.

Hence, where a visit is not possible, we typically triangulate various desk sources to ascertain whether a business logged previously continues to trade (and, if not, what is there now), or to identify a new occupant of a property (or section of property) that we previously recorded as empty:

- **Google search** – business details shown to the right of search results (linked to Google Maps and Google Business Profile) can identify when a business is “permanently closed”, though details are not always correct or up to date.
- **Google reviews and business photos** – the dates when reviews and photos were posted by Google users give clues to whether a business is still trading; reviews sometimes also state if a particular shop is now closed. If there are several recent reviews from the past few weeks, it is a fair assumption that the business in question is still live.
- **Shopping centre websites** – mall plans and lists of tenants are often a useful source, though few shopping centres are good at keeping this information up to date; several official mall websites that we visited in recent weeks, for example, still show their Wilko store as erroneously open. Shopping centre websites are often less useful for independent businesses, which tend instead to occupy former Woolworths sites on high streets and suburban precincts.



Keeping up with the changes is sometimes very challenging – we visited the ex-Woolworths in Colwyn Bay (store #361) in December 2023, only for the Costcutter and Bargain Booze store that was trading there to close down ten days later

- **Social media accounts** – the mere existence of a social media account for a business is no proof that it still trades, but very recent posts do act as confirmation. If a Facebook account is not actively posting, recent reviews from users can provide that evidence instead.
- **Social media searches** – Twitter and Facebook both have powerful search tools that can be used to bring up references in people’s public posts to businesses that have opened or closed. At the same time, many social media users kindly share updates with us about former Woolworths spotted on their travels.
- **Commercial property listings** – many, but not all, empty retail properties are marketed by an agent, so finding a live listing online can help confirm that it remains vacant. However, caution is needed; listings often remain live even after a property is let, and particulars in PDF format often hang around online (and in search results) even once the accompanying website listing is deleted and the property long reoccupied.
- **Planning applications** – applications for change of use or for advertising consent are useful in identifying new occupants, and are available online for each local council.
- **Online directories** – a presence on a site like Yell does not prove that a business is still active, but there are some independent occupants of former Woolworths sites that (inexplicably) are listed in these directories while being invisible on social media and Google Maps.
- **Direct contacts** – in a handful of cases, if no other sources have been able to provide the required information, we have contacted businesses directly to verify that they are still trading, or checked with local BIDs, business associations or other organisations.

## UPCOMING USES

In one or two instances, former Woolworths properties are currently vacant but have a confirmed occupant coming soon – sometimes following redevelopment, for instance. In these cases, our practice is to record the impending occupant, rather than count the unit as vacant.

## CORRECTIONS SINCE 2019

The robustness of our methods is reflected in the fact that since 2019 we have identified errors in our database relating to just four of the 807 former Woolworths locations.

These include three sites that in 2019 we had missed being subdivided into two units, including one of those with a previous use that we had not recorded; and one additional site that was incorrectly logged five years ago as having no previous occupants.

Where necessary, 2019 stats cited in this current report – such as the number of subdivided premises – include the retrospective corrections.

## ABOUT GRAHAM AND CANNYINSIGHTS.COM



*Graham appearing on BBC Breakfast in 2023*

Graham Soult is a high-street champion, digital marketing expert, respected media commentator, High Streets Task Force Expert, and Fellow of the Institute of Place Management (IPM), who founded and runs the retail consultancy CannyInsights.com.

He is also the chairman of North East networking organisation Durham Business Group.

Based in Gateshead but operating UK wide, CannyInsights.com works with independent and multiple retailers on the high street and online, as well as with related organisations such as landlords, local authorities, business associations and Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), to help them improve their offer and marketing.

Ongoing business support projects led by CannyInsights.com include the Indie Durham City campaign<sup>59</sup>, on behalf of City of Durham Parish Council, and

the Shop Chester-le-Street<sup>60</sup> initiative for the Chester-le-Street Area Action Partnership of Durham County Council.

Described on BBC Look North as “the region’s best-known retail expert”, and by ITV as “a North East Mary Portas”, Graham Soult is often named as being among the most influential retail people on Twitter (X), where he has more than 16,000 followers.

He has appeared regularly on TV, on radio, and in the press, including BBC’s The One Show, BBC News, Channel 5, LBC, The Guardian and Retail Week, and is a frequent keynote speaker on retail and high-street issues at conferences and seminars.

**For more information, search for Graham on Twitter and LinkedIn, or visit the website at [cannyinsights.com](https://cannyinsights.com).<sup>61</sup>**

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/woolworths-named-top-shop-people-31498766>.
- <sup>2</sup> Based on the 115,000 sq ft sales area of the Cheltenham John Lewis that opened in 2018: <https://www.retail-week.com/fashion/john-lewis-unveils-details-for-new-30m-cheltenham-store-opening-/5080037.article>.
- <sup>3</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2017/apr/18/did-you-lose-your-job-when-bhs-went-into-administration>.
- <sup>4</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-66743050>.
- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.drapersonline.com/news/mco-to-reopen-50-stores>.
- <sup>6</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/7811187.stm>.
- <sup>7</sup> <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/7751064.stm>.
- <sup>8</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE4992PM/>.
- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.thisismoney.co.uk/money/markets/article-1632894/Surprise-as-Woolies-chief-heads-for-the-exit.html>.
- <sup>10</sup> For the purposes of the research, we continue to adopt Clare Bailey's definition of small independent retailers as "businesses with very few retail outlets, usually a single store, with no headquarters or centralised management... Owner-operated and usually run from the shop (or from one of the shops where there are many)". This definition deliberately excludes a business like Boyes, which, although independent and family owned, is also now a sizable chain that has a head office in Scarborough and over 70 UK stores (including three in former Woolworths premises). For the full definition, see <https://retailchampion.wordpress.com/2011/06/13/what-is-an-independent-retailer/>.
- <sup>11</sup> <https://www.wilko.com/en-uk/corporate/wilko-reveals-plans-for-exeter-store-opening>.
- <sup>12</sup> Total includes Dealz on the Isle of Man. At least 71 of the Poundland sites are co-branded as Pep&Co on the store fascia.
- <sup>13</sup> Total includes one The Food Warehouse store.
- <sup>14</sup> Total includes B&M, Bargains and Home Store fascias, but excludes B&M Express, which is a rebranded Heron Foods.
- <sup>15</sup> Includes stores opened under Poundstretcher's (blue) Bargain Buys fascia since 2018. Confusingly, some of these stores previously traded under Poundworld's (red) Bargain Buys fascia.
- <sup>16</sup> Includes four stores branded as "B&M Express". B&M Express stores – usually a rebrand of previous Heron Foods sites – continue to be listed on the store locator on the Heron Foods website rather than the B&M one, so our categorisation follows the same logic.
- <sup>17</sup> Combined total for all fascias, including Tesco Express (some of which have been rebranded from Tesco Metro), Tesco, and Tesco Extra.
- <sup>18</sup> <https://www.soulsretailview.co.uk/2014/01/06/five-years-after-closure-newton-aycliffe-woolworths-may-soon-be-occupied/>.
- <sup>19</sup> <https://www.thenorthernecho.co.uk/news/23964957.newton-aycliffe-banking-hub-opens-unit-b3-parade/>.
- <sup>20</sup> <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/business/business-news/new-teesside-wetherspoons-could-open-11015864>.
- <sup>21</sup> <https://www.smithpricerrg.co.uk/properties/shops-to-let/Unit-30-Beveridge-Way-Aycliffe-Town-Centre-Newton-Aycliffe-DL5-4DP/107164>.
- <sup>22</sup> <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2023/07/uk-loses-6000-storefronts/>.
- <sup>23</sup> <https://www.themargateschool.com/>.
- <sup>24</sup> [https://twitter.com/Spears\\_Security/status/1712150819385331945](https://twitter.com/Spears_Security/status/1712150819385331945).
- <sup>25</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-hereford-worcester-66389936>.
- <sup>26</sup> <https://www.stokesentinel.co.uk/news/stoke-on-trent-news/abandoned-woolworths-store-turned-giant-5564885>.
- <sup>27</sup> <https://metro.co.uk/2023/11/28/wilko-make-high-street-return-300-new-stores-set-open-19896700/>.
- <sup>28</sup> Includes Family Bargains.
- <sup>29</sup> Total includes stores that traded under Poundworld's Discount UK and Bargain Buys fascias.
- <sup>30</sup> Figures includes stores trading under a dual Ethel Austin and Au Naturale fascia, as well as the experimental Life & Style format.
- <sup>31</sup> <https://twitter.com/soult/status/766335060144422913>.
- <sup>32</sup> <https://twitter.com/soult/status/172803977709015524>.
- <sup>33</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, we have included the 16 ex-Big W stores that were still trading as Woolworths at the time of its collapse – all of which had a retail sales area of over 31,000 sq ft – plus two additional, but much smaller, retail park stores in Shepton Mallet and Derby.
- <sup>34</sup> One of these Asda sites is Filton, where the former Woolworths was demolished, and a new building constructed on the same site.
- <sup>35</sup> <http://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/1960s-outoftown.htm>.
- <sup>36</sup> <https://www.migrationmuseum.org/>. The museum is temporarily closed, with a new exhibition due to open in March 2024.

- 
- 37 <https://www.g-s.co.uk/property/?property=50457>.
- 38 <https://greenwichwire.co.uk/2023/07/20/leegate-redevelopment-approved-with-15-storey-tower-and-562-homes/>.
- 39 <https://www.sthelensstar.co.uk/news/23311022.hardshaw-centre-emptying-town-centre-plans-bright/>.
- 40 <https://www.bristolpost.co.uk/news/bristol-news/demolition-plan-galleries-bristol-means-8910282>.
- 41 <https://londonist.com/london/latest-news/art-deco-gem-in-ealing-to-be-demolished>.
- 42 <https://www.rushmoor.gov.uk/town-centres-and-regeneration/union-yard/>.
- 43 <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/major-leisure-development-set-redcar-26143031>.
- 44 <https://www.axiomarchitects.co.uk/project/1051/camden-high-street-architecture->.
- 45 <https://www.stockton.gov.uk/article/6256/Stockton-Waterfront>.
- 46 <https://twitter.com/ChingfordHist/status/1691751809021268319>.
- 47 <https://www.l-i-o.co.uk/developments/the-crofton-orpington/>.
- 48 <https://www.hilldemolition.com/case-studies/tower-shopping-centre/>.
- 49 <https://www.acuitus.co.uk/property/4702/>.
- 50 <https://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/news/local-news/gallery/former-woolworths-store-tavistock-faces-5402915>.
- 51 <https://twitter.com/EE11FEE/status/1724174870278221852>.
- 52 <https://hertfordshirelep.co.uk/lep-projects/infrastructure/south-oxhey-regeneration/>.
- 53 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-berkshire-22892062>.
- 54 <https://sheerhouseredevelopment.co.uk/>.
- 55 <https://rennickproperty.com/project/181-195-st-johns-road/>.
- 56 <https://elephantandcastletowncentre.co.uk/looking-to-the-future/>.
- 57 <https://www.woolworthsmuseum.co.uk/WoolworthStores-FullList.html>.
- 58 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2009/mar/19/google-street-view-uk>.
- 59 <https://www.indiedurhamcity.co.uk/>.
- 60 <https://www.shopchesterlestreet.co.uk/>.
- 61 <https://www.cannyinsights.com/>.