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Twenty years on Bluewater, Kent

Hailed as Europe's largest and most innovative retail and leisure destination, Lend Lease's 1.6m sq ft Bluewater opened on March 16 1999.



Comprising three malls and three leisure villages, a 13,000 space car park – with valet parking available – 50 acres of parkland and seven lakes, the 320-unit mega-centre welcomed 120,000 visitors – or 'guests' in Bluewater speak – through its five hotel-style entrance halls on opening day alone.

They were greeted by 250 hosts offering help and advice and delivering what was described as a 'new standard in shopping centre customer service'.

The centre's retail mix was aimed at providing an alternative to central London with three department stores – John Lewis, House of Fraser and Marks & Spencer – and 59 international fashion and lifestyle stores.

There were also 40 restaurants, cafes and bars, a 12-screen Hoyts cinema and a wide range of activities for children.

Original coverage of the opening in *Shopping Centre* described the 'remarkable retail and leisure mix, its visitor friendly philosophy and its revolutionary design and architecture' as an 'instant hit' with curious shoppers.

"When Bluewater opened, there was a fanfare with people saying it was the new age of shopping," said general manager, Andrew Parkinson. "It was creative, innovative and it was seen as a benchmark not just for shopping centres but also for retail."

Now, Bluewater welcomes over 28 million guests a year spending

more than £150 on average each visit – a sales density second only to Heathrow.

Now with 330 units and 50 cafes, bars and restaurants, tenants include All Saints, Apple, Baby Gap, Caffe Concerto, Fossil, Goldsmiths, Hollister, Hotel Chocolat, Lush and Waterstones.

"The retail mix is very different to what it was 12 years ago," explained Parkinson. "Nearly 50 per cent of the retailers have changed since then and there are more and more international brands."

As well as retail, the leisure offer has grown, with the opening of Pirate Cove Adventure Golf in 2010 and the upcoming opening of The Events Venue, a 56,000-sq ft events and exhibition space.

"We're finding that when consumers choose where to spend their time and money, they're choosing between Bluewater and somewhere like the O2," said Parkinson. "It's very much about leisure."

2010 was a record year for Bluewater, with a sales increase of 3.3 per cent compared to 2009. Average dwell time at Bluewater is now 151 minutes.

"Bluewater has been very very successful," said Parkinson. "Sales are second to none and strong performance has led to tenants' hunger for bigger stores, resulting in a lot of resizes."

He spoke of the future.

"Looking out of my window now, the landscape is very different. There's new housing and Ebbsfleet international station is just a mile away. The area is dynamic and Bluewater has been a catalyst for development here – that may well continue into the future.

"There is the possibility to extend leisure and expand stores and it may be that at some point there's the development of a hotel or something like that."

This year Bluewater regained the top position in the UK shopping centre hierarchy according to Trevor Wood Associates's *Going Shopping 2011 – The Definitive Guide to Shopping Centres*. ■

Find out more:

For more information, please contact the author:

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January 2000

Selfridges signed for a 260,000 sq ft anchor store at Bullring, Birmingham.



March 2000

Universities Superannuation Scheme bought Edinburgh's Gyle shopping centre from Marks & Spencer for £187m.



February 2000

BAA McArthurGlen's 100-unit Designer Outlet Ashford opened.



March 2000

Lend Lease's £200m Touchwood retail and leisure scheme was under way and on course for a September 2001 opening.