

Conservation Area Developers Case Study – Worcester Cathedral Square: Development by Salmon Harvester Opportunity Fund

This case study examines the positive changes ushered in by the provision of a new public open space with adjacent retail/leisure development within the Worcester Historic City conservation area. Salmon Harvester Opportunity Fund are the developers and owners of Cathedral Square, and of a mixed-use property portfolio across the UK.

The scheme delivered:

- A new public space funded with contributions from Worcestershire County Council, Worcester City Council, Worcestershire LEP and owners Salmon Harvester
- 10,000sqm of floor space brought back into use, the retail and leisure pitch in Worcester redefined and this part of the city centre regenerated
- Many new exciting brands attracted to Worcester
- 600 construction jobs and apprenticeship opportunities created
- 415 jobs in retail and leisure created

Opposite the Cathedral at the southern end of the High Street, Cathedral Square has enabled the downgrading of the Deansway, a 1960's ring road whose construction saw the Cathedral Lychgate and historic Lich Street demolished, divorcing the Cathedral from the city. The adjacent 1960's Lychgate Shopping Centre prompted Nikolaus Pevsner to report in 1968 that the then new developments represented a "totally incomprehensible act of self-mutilation" by the City.

The new square and development redresses the balance. A reduced carriageway enables provision of much enhanced public space creating/reinstating a more fitting foreground to the Cathedral. The old precinct has been remodeled now presenting a more acceptable frontage giving first floor balcony views over the new square towards the Cathedral.



Worcester Cathedral Square. © Historic England

Salmon Harvester commented:

From the developer perspective it was evident that the old precinct began to seriously decline in 2007 when Sainsbury's Supermarket and the Gifford Hotel closed. Without an anchor store other surrounding retailers closed and the property failed to serve as a functioning shopping centre. When Salmon Harvester purchased the scheme in 2013, the centre was 50% vacant by floor area with only one occupier in the covered Lychgate Mall paying rent.

However, Salmon Harvester could see an opportunity to reposition the scheme:

- The space which wasn't vacant was well secured to occupiers such as H&M, Next, Travelodge and the NCP, all strong footfall drivers;
- Worcester has an affluent demographic but few units suitable for occupation by restaurant tenants, who would increase the city's offer whilst increasing dwell time;
- At the time the property was off-prime for retail, but the location opposite the Cathedral meant it was ideally located to attract restaurant occupiers ;
- The existing configuration of malls of small shops didn't suit city retail provision and needed to change significantly to function and prosper.

The centre has undergone a number of dramatic changes to produce an outward facing mixed retail and leisure scheme. These have been undertaken under two works packages by Speller Metcalfe Ltd. Some of the major changes are as follows:

1. Demolition of retail units facing the former roundabout and vacant upper parts;
2. Construction of 40,000 square feet of two storey externally facing restaurant accommodation. In total 9 restaurant units have been delivered on the existing footprint. Occupiers of the new frontage can take full advantage of the view across to the Cathedral and orientation towards to the afternoon and evening sun.

Salmon were fully aware of the sensitivity of development in a conservation area and, particularly, the responsibility of development opposite the Grade I listed Cathedral. This situation is one of the elements which attracted Salmon to invest in the property and presented one of the greatest opportunities for development. Given the sensitive nature of the site, Salmon engaged with the Cathedral, also presenting plans to the Conservation Area Committee, MADE Design Review Panel and Historic England whilst also engaging in extensive pre-planning application dialogue and a public exhibition. Public Sector involvement in the scheme meant Salmon also met regularly with Worcestershire County highways team and the City economic development and regeneration team.

Undoubtedly the planning and consultation process was longer than would be the case if Salmon were not developing in a conservation area. The additional scrutiny the developer was under ensured that the design and materials used were of high quality. The build cost and the type of contractor interested in the job were also influenced by the restrictions on developing in a tight city centre environment.

However, Salmon Harvester didn't feel that conservation area status placed too many restrictions on their ability to deliver "good growth" and so it would appear the conservation area designation has served its intended purpose very well.

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