



PRESS RELEASE

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NATIONAL AWARD FOR RUNCORN SHOPPING CENTRE'S AMAZING TURNAROUND

Runcorn Shopping Centre's amazing three year transformation has received official recognition from the national retail industry at their industry Oscars, the SCEPTRE Awards, held last night at the Dorchester Hotel in London.

The Runcorn Centre's manager Karl Clawley was a runner-up (2nd place) in the gold ribbon category, Large Shopping Centre Manager of the Year, against an impressive field of seven managers across the UK, including Birmingham's Bull Ring.

Karl, 51, formerly Retail Business Manager at Manchester's Arndale, came to Halton Lea Shopping City in 2013 when it had recently come out of administration. The centre was bought by F&C Reit and was given to Savills to manage. At that time 40% of the units were vacant. The centre had been neglected for many years by its previous owners, was unloved and provided a limited offer to its loyal band of local shoppers.

Fast forward three years after a massive investment of cash, energy and vision and the centre is again a thriving community space offering a wide range of shops, events and services from clothes and shoes to travel and food.

Thanks to F&C Reit the company saw the potential of this once glittering centrepiece of Runcorn's New Town. Opened by the Queen in 1972 – the concrete pillars and box-like design promised local residents a brave new shopping world. Sadly without investment by its previous owners Fordgate, 40 years on the design was looking tired and dated.

With the help of a £10 million investment package, Karl's first job was to remove one of the malls to create a new 25,000 sq ft unit and refurbish three of the car parks. He also brought wi-fi to the centre.

He recalls: "Within three days of the switch-on, 500 people had logged on. Runcorn shoppers are extremely tech-savvie. Our shoppers like a bargain, they log on and compare prices.

"We desperately needed to improve the image so we rebranded to Runcorn Shopping Centre as no-one outside the area identified with Halton Lea, although we'll always be known locally as "the city". We now have a great website, a very active Facebook and Twitter account and aim to respond to any comments within an hour. We have over 3,500 followers watching out for special offers and events – mostly very supportive of what we're doing.

"In the early days we had plenty of critics but we tackled this head on by inviting our worst detractors to visit the centre and discuss our future plans. We wanted them to see the changes we'd made and to understand the huge hurdles we've had to overcome – not least being built on stilts. The approach worked and they have since become some of our most vocal ambassadors.

"In summer 2014 we wanted to deliver a community focused event and decided to create an indoor Community Park which saw us grass over part of the central Town Square. We set up a bandstand and invited members of the public to entertain each other. We organised special lunch deals and it proved to be a winning formula. People sat on the grass having their lunch – and we've never looked back."

One of the biggest challenges was the closure of the integrated Tesco store in April 2015 with the loss of 110 jobs. Karl and his team worked hard to attract another major retailer to the site and was delighted when the home and garden chain The Range confirmed they would be taking over the large empty unit. After some delay the shop fit is now underway and 100 new staff are being recruited to run the store. It is due to open its doors this summer.

Karl recalls: "When Tesco pulled out it affected the whole centre. My team and I had to deal with a lot of negativity from other traders as well as the shoppers. Sadly it was easier to kick the place than love it.

"But we want people to love where they live and we want people to love coming to the centre to shop – and that is slowly but surely turning around. How you treat people is a big part of improving the customer experience and every morning we tour the centre, talking to retailers and customers.

"We've trained our staff in a new bespoke customer experience programme called 'Magic' developed by the company behind Mary Portas. We've also been the first shopping centre to achieve World Host accreditation for customer service which was developed by the organisers of the 2012 Olympic Games.

“The bigger chains are coming back. New Look has recently opened a bigger store and we’re giving a boost to local entrepreneurs by offering a £50-a-week stall in “The Box” community store, full of artisan crafts and food.

“People often don’t realise but retail offers great careers. We are jointly helping shop owners employ new staff and tackling unemployment by offering training courses in retail – a joined-up initiative which is proving very successful.”

Karl himself started as a stockroom boy at the age of 17 working for Topman in Warrington. A promotion to the ‘denim’ department and a sales target incentive gave him the drive to succeed. He was selected for management training which then prepared him for the varied career he has since enjoyed, including manager of Manchester’s Arndale Centre after the IRA bomb.

He is now approaching the task of transforming Runcorn Shopping Centre with the same vigour and enthusiasm that he brought to the Arndale. He is surrounded by a strong management team which includes Paul McGuire (operations), Claire Wooltorton (marketing), Matt Williams (security) and Shauna Dunkerley who heads up the housekeeping team, plus a dedicated team of cleaners and security, a total team of 70 local people.

The centre now employs over 1,000 retail staff, working in 50 stores, ranging from department store to a small key-cutter and his vacant unit rate has shrunk to a mere 10%.

This summer, the Runcorn Shopping Centre is again at the heart of the community as sponsor and venue for *Halton’s Got Talent* competition, run by Halton Borough Council. Last year’s winner, schoolgirl singing sensation Beau Dermott went on to become a finalist in the ITV Britain’s Got Talent national contest.

Like Beau, Karl is hoping to put Runcorn on the map.

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