

## **Towcester (682) : Opening**

Waitrose Towcester opened on 26<sup>th</sup> August 2004. The following appeared in The Gazette at the time.

### **“Towcester toasts the arrival of Waitrose**

The new Waitrose branch in Towcester was the talk of the town when it opened last Thursday (26 August). From 8.30am until closing time customers crowded into the store, with some so eager to see what was on offer they were still trying to get in as Partners locked up for the night.

Chris Prest, Branch Manager, has been amazed at the interest generated. “There’s been a real buzz in town following our reopening as Waitrose,” he says. “I’ve never seen the car park so full. Our first-day sales were absolutely phenomenal, more than double a normal Thursday’s trade. It was way beyond all my expectations and I am proud of the way the team successfully managed our busiest trading day in years.”

Surrounded by towns with established Waitrose stores such as Daventry, Kingsthorpe and Milton Keynes, Towcester is an ideal location. Waitrose is well known to local residents and most are relieved they finally have one nearby.

Situated within walking distance of the town centre, Waitrose is in a good position because of its easily accessible 250-space car park and close proximity to Towcester’s thriving market square.

Mr Prest has been impressed: “We’ve been overwhelmed in the past fortnight as more and more people have turned up to convert this branch. The only part still recognisable is the four walls; everything else has moved, is brand new or has been totally refurbished. We have new meat, fish and patisserie counters, new checkouts, a new warehouse floor, a beautiful wines section and a relocated cafe. The assortment offers a third more chilled fresh food and thousands more lines.

“I am just bowled over by the transformation. I can’t imagine how this scale of change has been effected in just two weeks. Within 30 minutes of handing the keys over to Waitrose, the place was full of over 100 Partners and contractors— the level of co-ordination is remarkable.”

He praised the support provided. “It’s been a rollercoaster two weeks and we’ve all been grateful for the help received from the seconded team. As well as ensuring we are familiar with new systems, they also keep checking we are adapting emotionally. It is reassuring to know the Partnership cares — we are not used to being asked how we feel about things! Being co-owners will make a refreshing change for us all.”

The Waitrose vision of quality food, honestly priced and expertly served has been taken on board by Mr Prest’s team. “Apart from the excellent quality of food, high customer service levels are one of the business’s key attributes,” he says. “The training we’ve received fully reflects this.”

Yvonne Lowe, Assistant, meat/fish service counters, has been with the branch since it opened six years ago. “We’ve always paid attention to customer service, but the training has made us think of better and different ways to deal with shoppers. The customers

are going to be amazed by the new assortments and quality on offer. My meat and fish counters are a great improvement, with lots of display room plus plenty of working space behind.”

Claire Cameron, Assistant Section Manager, personnel/office, says: “It’s been the best training I’ve ever received. I like the fact that we are constantly assessed and receive performance-related pay. It means that I have something to work towards. I’m keen to move up the career ladder and there are plenty of opportunities to progress.

“I didn’t recognise the branch— the shop floor looks so light, airy and modern. Even the offices are spacious and easier to work in. We have a training room and the dining room is much more comfortable and relaxing.” At 18,000 sq ft, Waitrose Towcester is one of the smallest conversions, but its layout and size has proved particularly compatible with the Waitrose offer. During his opening day visit, Mark Price, Selling and Marketing Director, Waitrose, noticed how well the branch had converted. “The vast majority of shoppers will struggle to tell it was formerly a Sainsbury, thanks to the conversion team’s efforts and enthusiasm of Partners,” he says.

“Customers have been extremely positive and it was encouraging to hear that many are planning, at this early stage, to switch their shopping allegiances from nearby competitors.”

The eleventh Morrisons/Sainsbury conversion, Waitrose Towcester is just over half way through the food division’s intensive programme. Mr Price pays tribute to everyone involved. “When you consider that we usually open three or four branches plus a handful of extensions in a normal year, it is remarkable to consider that this year, we are not only opening three new shops and extending four branches, but converting 19 stores too.

“It is a huge amount of work and I am constantly amazed by the positive and cheerful outlook with which Partners— not only those involved directly in the conversions, but also those who have had to manage their branches without the seconded Partners— carry out their work. In addition, the core Waitrose business continues to generate healthy sales and excellent profits.”

Mr Prest is one such happy Partner and for him Waitrose Towcester’s opening has been a surreal, unforgettable experience. “One moment I was escorting the Mayor and Mayoress of Towcester around the branch and the next I was posing for press photographs and welcoming thousands of new and former customers. It has been a fantastic start.