Today, based in the heart of Wakefield, the Ridings Shopping Centre offers an exciting mix of retailers and eateries, as well as hosting regular events for all the family to enjoy. The centre is visited by millions of visitors each year.

People have been doing their shopping in Wakefield for hundreds of years, indeed, for more than a thousand years.

Wakefield has certainly been a centre of trade in England since the 1100s. A Royal Charter in 1204 gave the right to hold trading fairs in three Yorkshire cities - Wakefield, Beverley and York. The fairs in Wakefield at first offered wool, then later the wool was dyed and later still, coloured finished cloth was sold.

In Elizabethan times Wakefield held a corn market. Then, as the canal systems were developed during the 18th century and the railways during the 19th, Wakefield market sold a variety of everyday requirements. In 1847 Wakefield Borough Market Company was formed which put up a market hall. People shopped in the area bounded by Westgate, the Bull Ring and the Cathedral and stalls began to develop into shops along the narrow streets that made up Cross Square.

The Market Cross was the focus until it was removed in 1866.

For some years in the 20th century trade flourished, but after the Second World War other towns began to take precedence over Wakefield for shopping in Yorkshire. In an attempt to put things right for Wakefield the market was rebuilt in 1964. Soon, new streets were built, including Brook Street, Teall Street and Westmoreland Street. Two years later a major shopping and housing development was proposed. It was built between 1968 and 1971 and included the shops between the Kirkgate precinct and George Street, the Almshouse Lane multi-storey car park and four blocks of flats.

In 1974, the Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, formed by the reorganisation of local government, produced another scheme of improvements. This time the aim was to create the Cathedral precinct with pedestrian areas, landscaping round the immediate area of the Cathedral, and the provision of facilities for the disabled. Those changes were finished in 1977, just in time for the Queen’s visit to Wakefield in her Silver Jubilee year.

Competition from other towns and cities, however, still meant a loss of trade in Wakefield. These developments hit Wakefield particularly hard because a high percentage of its shopping trade had been in food and domestic convenience goods. The council had to find some way of bringing the sale of durable goods, those items such as clothes and furniture that are bought less often, into Wakefield’s city centre. Shops that had managed to remain open in the city were having trouble expanding and improving their services because of limited site ownership.

At the same time, land alongside these shops was under-used. It was decided to take 6.6 acres, then the site of a dance hall, a car park and so on, and turn them into a modern, attractive and convenient shopping mall.

In late 1978 an outline plan was submitted for a covered shopping centre, some extension of existing shops and 850 new parking spaces. All relevant bodies were consulted to make sure no safety or building regulations would be broken and that no-one’s right would be abused.

Progress was rapid, and by April of the following year all necessary permission had been granted for the outline plan and a road closure order was drafted. This was necessary as a new road network was planned to make the new centre easily accessible. The drafted order was confirmed by the Secretary of State in March 1980.

Now the developers, Capital & Counties, could firm up their ideas and more detailed plans were submitted. Two groups of officials guided the project through a minefield of laws and regulations. A control group dealt with matters of principle and a steering group dealt with their application in the detailed tasks that had to be done.

To pick up ideas from people who had experience in setting up similar schemes, the Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and Capital & Counties jointly paid for a study tour of shopping centres in New York, Boston, Atlanta and Toronto.

Some 2.5 million people live within a 30 minute drive of The Ridings, resulting in some 200,000 visits each week, over 10.5 million visitors a year.

At the time of its opening on 17 October, 1983, The Ridings was architecturally and economically the most innovative development in the region. It was one of the UK’s forerunners in the development of the American concept of covered shopping malls with integrated customer facilities.

Work began on the Ridings centre early in 1981 and took 2½ years, and £23 million to complete. Located at the rear of existing shops on Kirkgate and Little Westgate (opposite the Cathedral), the external brickwork was designed in such a way that the centre blends into the established Wakefield townscape, nestling comfortably among surrounding buildings.

The Centre was built to a unique design, so that shoppers could enter and exit from the street on all levels. Peter Spawforth, who was the chief planning officer at the Council at the time, had travelled to America and Canada in search of ideas.

As a result The Ridings was revolutionary, boasting the first Food Court in the UK and the first glass wall climber lift.

The site originally housed a number of older buildings: two doctors’ surgeries, the Salvation Army, a pub, a dance hall, a car park, public toilets, baths and roads. All the existing occupiers were either re-housed on or off site, or otherwise compensated.

A quarry was discovered in the early stage of building. It is thought to date back to when stone was cut for the Cathedral construction. The lower mall, which originally opened in 1972 and traded as an open shopping precinct, was incorporated into the new scheme with a new glazed roof and updated finishes and services to meet the standards of the rest of the Centre.

More than 4,000 people walked through the doors on the Sunday before the official opening, even though it was before Sunday trading hours were introduced and they couldn’t buy anything. Excited children from across the district were given a half day off when The Ridings officially opened on Monday 17 October so that they could visit the pioneering centre.

Over 1,200 people worked at the Centre when it first opened, in addition to over 40 people employed directly by the Ridings Centre Management as well as numerous contract staff.

This page: Exterior and interior views of the Ridings Centre, the place for fantastic value shopping with over 80 stores offering a great mix of big brand names and unique independent stores all under cover.
Originally developed by Capital & Counties in partnership with Wakefield Metropolitan District Council and designed by architects, Chapman Taylor Partners, The Ridings was named after the three historic divisions of Yorkshire, the North, West and East Ridings.

In 2008 £2.5 million was spent refurbishing the Centre, this involved new entrances for Cathedral Walk, Almshouse and Kirkgate, new lifts with glass and natural light was used to enhance the Centre.

Today, The Ridings houses more than 85 stores and a selection of cafes and eateries with over 1,000 car parking spaces. The Ridings employs 40 members of staff, three of whom joined the Centre when it first opened its doors.

Offering a selection of big name brands and independent retailers, some such as BHS, Boots, Marks and Spencer and Morrisons have been in The Ridings since it first opened. The Centre continues to attract new tenants and renewals.

Complementing existing retailers, The Ridings also hosts a number of ‘pop-up’ boutiques and fairs, a monthly craft market and there are also a growing number of co-operative run stores. A full schedule of family friendly and exciting events has also helped keep footfall high.

Barbara Winston, Centre Manager, says “The Ridings has celebrated some fantastic achievements since its opening and we’re delighted that shoppers, both new and old, keep returning. There have been many changes to the retail landscape over the last three decades, but by listening to our customers and retailers and by constantly being innovative, The Ridings remains an immensely popular and much loved attraction.”