



# Dunelm packs in the product

The homewares stores may not be the most aesthetically pleasing, but they have a lot to offer. John Ryan visits the Milton Keynes shop

**O**n paper this is not the most appealing proposition. Take a large shed on a retail park, fill it with merchandise – and the truth is that the shopper is as likely to find the various segmented departments by default as by design – and hope for the best. This is, however, a modern multichannel shop, so ‘reserve and collect same day’ and ‘20,000 products to order online’, are both advertised.

Yet there is something curiously old-fashioned about the store in terms of its merchandising, which seems to revolve around the principle of more really is more, and a catch-all product assortment. Welcome to Dunelm Mill in Milton Keynes. The store has been open since 2010 and is a reasonably typical branch from a retailer that operates predominantly from edge-of-town locations with a very substantial range of homewares.

So far, so average. Visit any retail park worth its salt and there will be plenty of homewares retailers all vying for attention from shoppers pulling up in their cars and deciding which shed to walk into.

But to judge from the retailer’s half-year results revealed last week, a large number of them opt to wander into a Dunelm or Dunelm Mill branch (the ‘Mill’ part of the name has been dropped in newer stores).

In the 26 weeks to December 28, Dunelm sales rose 4.8% (although like-for-likes were down by 0.9%) and pre-tax profit was up 2.9% to £61.6m.

Stand at the entrance to the Milton Keynes branch and, while it is clear that there has been thought given to the way the store looks, it amounts to a mild assault on the visual cortex.

This is a two-floor affair – a ground floor and a large mezzanine that has a balcony overlooking the cash desk and affording views of the front of the shop.

As the shopper looks around, much of the upper perimeter has been adorned with unfurled rolls of printed

## **DUNELM MILL, MILTON KEYNES**

**Opened** 2010

**Format** Superstore

with a ground floor

and a mezzanine

**Design** In-house

**Sales per square foot**

**in a Dunelm store** £180

**Chief executive**

Nick Wharton

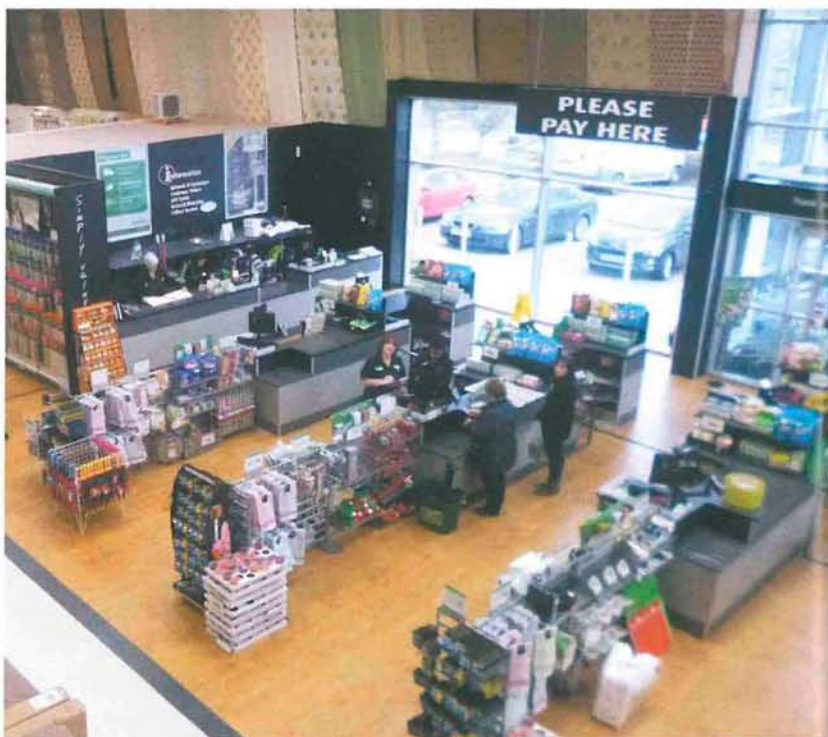
or woven fabric, giving a variegated hanging tapestry-like effect as a visual sweep is made of the ground interior.

When the eye falls, it is likely that choices will have to be made. Directly in front of the glass entrance atrium there is a bank of four supermarket-style checkouts, each of which is backed by shelves of impulse purchases, in case customers suddenly find they are short of batteries, tea towels, scourers or other essentials.

The emphasis is on price and to the right of the checkouts there is a customer service area bearing the message ‘simply value’.

Messaging in this area of the store plays a major part for the visitor with graphics encouraging shoppers to buy a Dunelm gift card – ‘Love from you, choice from Dunelm’ – and ‘Reserve with a click collect in a tick’ being typical of both tone of voice and the kind of marketing that is used.

Beyond this lies the store itself.



For more pictures  
of Dunelm Milton  
Keynes and more store  
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## IN BUSINESS STORES







◀ To the left there's bedlinen from Dorma, displayed on branded Dorma mid-floor units, while to the right there are shower curtains, curtains, curtain rails and associated accessories.

There is little that could be described as slick about the merchandising and there is perhaps the sense that this is the home furnishings equivalent of Poundland, so densely merchandised is the floor.

And, like Poundland, it is quite difficult to see your way through individual departments as the stock is stacked relatively high.

Dunelm chief executive Nick Wharton acknowledges this is an issue but says it is being tackled: "The challenge is that we've got about 20,000 products in a store and we have this across 21 categories. We do this in a large format, but not an enormous one."

Typically a Dunelm store is between 30,000 sq ft and 32,000 sq ft.

Wharton adds that dealing with this has meant training 8,000 colleagues over the last two years "in the customer-first programme, to help them engage more with customers, and we've been trying to give them more time to do so."

It is perhaps owing to the nature of the stock and the high-rise displays that the lower edge of the mezzanine has large signs indicating the various categories that can be found upstairs and these are easily seen.

### Haberdashery appeal

Long before heading for the staircase however, there is the area directly beneath the mezzanine and it is here, to a large extent, that one of the major reasons for Dunelm's success becomes apparent.

Haberdashery is one of those words that for younger generations tends to be the domain of maiden aunts. Yet it is and remains a mainstay at John Lewis on Oxford Street, making it a destination in its own right.

Under the mezzanine in Dunelm Mill in Milton Keynes there is a haberdashery department, complete with a long table for measuring and cutting cloth – just the sort of thing that used to be common in most department stores.

This perhaps is why this store has a mild sense of yesteryear about it, yet this is one of the more popular elements of the product mix and helps to cement the store's place as a go-to shop for Milton Keynes customers.

Wharton says: "We are the destination specialist in homewares and how that works is that we've got everything



The upstairs floor features a cafe along with the retailer's furniture and cookware offers

**"WE'VE GOT ABOUT 20,000 PRODUCTS IN A STORE ACROSS 21 CATEGORIES"**

Nick Wharton, Dunelm

that the DIY curtain-maker might need. We've got about 4,000 fabrics that we sell by the metre. And on top of that we have a made-to-measure service."

Upstairs there is furniture and cookware. The mezzanine is divided up into category spaces with the front of the area having high, freestanding

shelving units that are at right angles to the balustrade from which views out over the ground floor are afforded.

Once more the impression is that of a floor area that has been divided up but to which a store design brush has not been applied. There is also a cafe on this level for those for whom it all proves too much and who need a caffeine shot.

Wharton says that most of the more recent stores follow the format that is on show in Milton Keynes.

He adds that "the main reason we're on the edge of town is because that's where our customers want us to be. We sell quite a lot of bulky stuff. When you come into one of our stores, you'll see homewares shoppers shopping with shopping trolleys. This is something that you don't see in other places."

Dunelm's success therefore is probably down to product assortment and choice, rather a finely honed store design. It works: the figures consistently point to this and at £180 per square foot with a store portfolio that provides about 4 million sq ft of selling space, this is a serious retailer.

At present there are 131 UK stores, with plans in place to head towards 200. As interiors, these may not be the most aesthetically pleasing, but it's hard to argue with their efficacy as selling machines.



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