

STORES

At White Stuff's Bath store 'social retailing' is not about Facebook or Twitter, but tapping into community spirit. **John Ryan** visits

White Stuff's social

There is a tendency among retailers to celebrate milestones in terms of numbers. If a group gets to store number 99 preparations soon begin for celebrations when the 100th store opens its doors.

But the unpalatable fact is that reaching a century does not mean that the stores change in appearance. Indeed, chances are that the 100th store will be almost identical to the 99th.

Perhaps for this reason the promise of a visit to White Stuff's 99th store – in Bath – was in some ways more inviting than the inevitable brouhaha that accompanied the opening of its 100th, which launched in Ely last week.

The Bath branch opened its doors to shoppers on September 12 and incorporates several new features over 3,700 sq ft, spread across two floors.

Pause point

First and foremost among them is the fact that this is a space for people. According to Anthony Rudolph, head of interiors: "We've always had a big focus on social in our stores and we wanted to push this forward." Rudolph says this while seated in a semi-discrete room at the back of the shop, dubbed The Kitchen Table.

This is not entirely accurate because it is not a kitchen *per se*, but the relatively modest space is crammed with kitchenware and offers weary shoppers the chance to sit down and have a cuppa.

It also serves as shorthand for the whole shop inasmuch as it has a make-do and mend feel about it with school classroom chairs, a battered wooden table and pictures that can safely be described as kitsch.

There is something reassuring about all of this and although it is at the back of the store, it does set the tone for much of the interior.

On the ground floor the initial



view is of womenswear. There is more chintz and the feeling that while this may be a shop that is predominantly about clothing, there is something entertaining to see at every turn.

The store is broken up into a series of rooms where visual merchandising is to the fore. This takes many forms, ranging from a

frieze on the left-hand perimeter wall of the Georgian houses that form the city's world-famous Crescent, to a shelf that supports bell jars filled with Russian dolls.

The former is a self-explanatory attempt to localise what has been done, but the latter, according to Rudolph, is just part of keeping the store interesting and different.

Community spirit

The cash desk on this floor resembles a sweet-shop – a now familiar trope in White Stuff – and in the middle of the back wall there is a large graphic of a red cockerel.

This is the emblem of the Bath City Farm charity. Those using The Kitchen Table for a coffee or tea will receive their drink for free,

More pictures of White Stuff's Bath store on
Retail-week.com/WhiteStuffBath



store



but are encouraged to make a discretionary donation to the local charity – The Kitchen Table operates on a not-for-profit basis.

It can also be hired for events but, once again, the profits are given to Bath City Farm. All of which chimes with the notion of “social retailing”.

Rudolph says: “A lot of the

It's about taking the customer away from the everyday

buildings that we take have unused rooms and we are looking to use them for this purpose.”

And so to the staircase that takes the shopper up to menswear on the first floor. On a wall in the stairwell there are framed prints.

They are in fact prints that are used on White Stuff clothing. “We design all of our prints in-house

and it was something that we didn't feel was being communicated strongly enough,” says Rudolph. Again, the idea of using that which you already have is part of what has been done when creating this interior.

The first floor retains the same mood, but the visual merchandising becomes more retro

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► masculine with a valve radio and a wall of dark-wood vintage mirrors being typical of the kind of props that are deployed.

And then there is more tea. This time Rudolph and his team have created a wall of 20 different kinds of tea next to the cash desk – another sweet shop. Shoppers can sample any of these and once again, old chairs and tables have been used to create a homely feel.

This floor is home to the fitting rooms, designed to look like retro shower cubicles and the lighting is even provided by shower heads that have been turned into luminaires. “We see inspiration everywhere,” says Rudolph. Looking at what has been done in this store it is hard to disagree.

Finally, on the wall to the right of the fitting room block, there is an



WHITE STUFF, BATH

Opened September 12, 2015

Design In-house

Size 3,700 sq ft

Number of floors 2

Ambience Make-do and mend

arch. It is a Roman arch, complete with Doric columns, and on it is the Latin name for Bath – Aquae Sulis – a rather more high-brow reference to the store’s location.

Local merchandising

Calling the Bath store White Stuff’s 99th is probably mildly inaccurate because this is a relocation – the previous store was next door. “We have been successful next door for some years and were looking for a larger site and that kind of thing doesn’t come up in Bath too often,” says Rudolph.

Maybe not, but what marks this one out is the manner in which it fits seamlessly into the Bath retail landscape as a whole. This may only have opened recently, but it feels as if it has been there as long as any of its neighbours.

Rudolph says that the plan in future stores is to place the same kind of emphasis on “social retailing” as is the case in this store, and Hexham is next in line for the treatment.

While this may be the strategy, it is a fair bet that what will be done in Northumberland will be different from Bath, simply owing to the idiosyncratic and location-specific visual merchandising and propping that characterises what this retailer does.

As Rudolph puts it: “It’s about taking the customer away from the everyday. We’re a family brand and this is our first big emporium to stress this.”

There are many good shops in Bath, but this is among the better that the legions of tourists will encounter. ■