# Debenhams closures leave Britain’s high streets haunted by empty stores and uncertain futures



Britain's high streets are facing an existential crisis, evidenced starkly by the demise of Debenhams, a once-vibrant pillar of the retail landscape. The department store, which thrived for over 200 years, succumbed to financial pressures exacerbated by evolving consumer habits and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The void left by its departure is palpable, as around 73% of its former locations remain empty, creating a concerning blight on town centres. This dramatically underscores a broader retail crisis, with many towns left wrestling with the ghostly presence of the hollowed-out stores.

Debenhams went into liquidation in 2021, resulting in an estimated 12,000 job losses. The aftermath has seen derelict premises—some merely boarded up, while others are cloaked in scaffolding, awaiting redevelopment into residential spaces. Residents like Antonia Cook, 25, express a nostalgic yearning for the past when the store was a bustling hub, contributing to a sense of community that has now faded. As she remarked, the area feels increasingly desolate, reminiscent of a ghost town dominated by generic establishments like barbers and vape shops.

The impact of Debenhams' closure has rippled throughout the communities it once served. Councillor Neil MacDonald of Ipswich Borough Council has voiced concerns over the negative influence of the shuttered Debenhams on the town's vitality, indicating that its vacancy can deter new business investments. This sentiment resonates with many locals, including 78-year-old Dorothy Lumb, who lamented the decline of high street shopping, underscoring the emotional connection people have with what were once integral parts of their shopping experience.

While Council leaders are keen to repurpose these empty sites, they face mounting challenges. The sheer size of many Debenhams stores limits their attractiveness for new tenants, with Paul Dobson, a professor at the University of East Anglia, highlighting that large retail spaces are no longer viable in an age dominated by online shopping. His analysis reveals a troubling cycle: as vacancies increase, the attractiveness of town centres diminishes, further perpetuating a downward spiral.

Recent data shows that repurposing efforts have been slow, with only a minority of former Debenhams sites earmarked for future use. Retailers like Marks & Spencer and The Range have taken over select locations, but the bleak reality is that many sites remain stagnant. In Ipswich alone, while the local council has reported interest from prospective tenants, significant delays and unfulfilled negotiations have left the store's fate uncertain.

Amidst this retail landscape, measures like potential reforms to business rates are being explored. According to the British Retail Consortium, high business rates create formidable barriers that deter new store openings, contributing to the high vacancies seen across the country. Helen Dickinson, the chief of the BRC, emphasises that the current system suppresses investment, particularly as larger retailers anchor foot traffic for smaller shops. Conversely, there have been hints of optimism, with Dickinson noting that footfall has shown signs of revival recently.

Despite the bleak outlook for many high streets, the current climate has prompted some innovative responses. The Frasers Group, which owns House of Fraser, has begun transforming former Debenhams locations into multi-brand experiences, signifying a shift in strategy to adapt to the changing retail environment.

Nonetheless, the struggle to revitalise these sites reflects broader societal issues. Local residents have expressed concerns that unoccupied stores attract anti-social behaviours, with some locations becoming hotspots for vandalism and rough sleeping. This unsettling reality has fostered a sense of insecurity among residents, further diminishing the likelihood that shoppers will frequent these desolate areas.

The stark reality of the changing retail landscape is that, unless significant investment and strategic overhaul occur, many former high street stalwarts may remain abandoned markers of a bygone era. For towns like Ipswich and Norwich, the challenges are steep, but with the right policies and community engagement, there remains a glimmer of hope for revitalisation. As the British high street navigates these choppy waters, the compelling need to rethink and renew the shopping experience will determine its trajectory for years to come.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.retail-insight-network.com/features/what-does-boohoos-debenhams-acquisition-mean-for-uk-retail/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2023/05/debenhams-stores-empty/), [[4]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/dec/01/debenhams-close-stores-jobs-department-store-jd-sports)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[5]](https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/debenhams-closing-stores-job-losses-high-street-finance-economy-latest-a8600516.html), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/15/debenhams-bows-out-after-200-years-leaving-town-centres-counting-the-cost)
* Paragraph 4 – [[2]](https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2023/05/debenhams-stores-empty/), [[3]](https://www.retail-insight-network.com/features/what-does-boohoos-debenhams-acquisition-mean-for-uk-retail/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2023/05/debenhams-stores-empty/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/15/debenhams-bows-out-after-200-years-leaving-town-centres-counting-the-cost), [[7]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/12/01/debenhams-link-arcadia-could-provide-jd-sports-elegant-exit/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[6]](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/15/debenhams-bows-out-after-200-years-leaving-town-centres-counting-the-cost)
* Paragraph 9 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[3]](https://www.retail-insight-network.com/features/what-does-boohoos-debenhams-acquisition-mean-for-uk-retail/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14716027/death-Debenhams-ghost-stores-ruining-town-centres.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.retailgazette.co.uk/blog/2023/05/debenhams-stores-empty/> - As of May 2023, 73% of former Debenhams stores remain vacant, with only 27% having future use plans. The majority of these vacant units are located in the South East, North East England, and Scotland. Some former stores have been repurposed by retailers like Marks & Spencer and The Range. The closures have left significant gaps in high streets, with plans for mixed developments, including residential and retail spaces, being considered to fill these voids.
3. <https://www.retail-insight-network.com/features/what-does-boohoos-debenhams-acquisition-mean-for-uk-retail/> - Boohoo's acquisition of Debenhams in 2021 led to the closure of all 124 department stores, resulting in the loss of approximately 12,000 jobs. The closures have significantly impacted high streets, especially in smaller towns where Debenhams served as an anchor retailer. The vast vacant spaces have posed challenges for landlords and councils in repurposing these sites, with some considering alternative uses to revitalize town centers.
4. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/dec/01/debenhams-close-stores-jobs-department-store-jd-sports> - In December 2020, Debenhams announced the closure of all 124 department stores after going into liquidation, putting up to 12,000 jobs at risk. The closures have left significant gaps in high streets and shopping centers across the UK, with landlords and councils facing challenges in repurposing these large spaces. The demise of Debenhams, along with other high-profile retail failures, has intensified the crisis facing the UK high street.
5. <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/business/news/debenhams-closing-stores-job-losses-high-street-finance-economy-latest-a8600516.html> - Debenhams announced the closure of up to 50 stores, putting approximately 4,000 jobs at risk, following the largest loss in its 240-year history. The closures are part of a strategy to reduce costs associated with its nationwide network of department stores. The company reported a £491.5 million loss in the year to 1 September, compared to a profit of £59 million the previous year, highlighting the financial challenges faced by the retailer.
6. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/may/15/debenhams-bows-out-after-200-years-leaving-town-centres-counting-the-cost> - After 200 years, Debenhams closed its doors in May 2021, resulting in the loss of over 20,000 jobs. The closures have had a significant impact on town centers, with many now facing challenges in repurposing the large vacant spaces. The demise of Debenhams, along with other high-profile retail failures, has intensified the crisis facing the UK high street, with landlords and councils seeking alternative uses for these sites to revitalize town centers.
7. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/business/2020/12/01/debenhams-link-arcadia-could-provide-jd-sports-elegant-exit/> - Debenhams' liquidation in December 2020 resulted in the closure of all 124 department stores, leaving a 14 million square foot hole in high streets across the UK. The closures have put up to 12,000 jobs at risk and have had a significant impact on the retail sector, with landlords and councils facing challenges in repurposing these large spaces. The demise of Debenhams, along with other high-profile retail failures, has intensified the crisis facing the UK high street.