

Woolies: The sale of a century

After 99 years, Woolworths will disappear from the high street after desperate proposal to find a buyer ended in failure

By Paul Vallely

"The biggest sale ever," read the huge signs all over the shop windows at Woolworths yesterday. Sadly, there will be an even bigger sale today.

At 4.30pm yesterday, the managers of the chain's 815 outlets received an email from head office telling them that a buyer had not been found for the great icon of the British high street which has £385m of debt. From today, it told them, they were to launch a closing-down sale.

"Low everyday prices" had just got even lower. Inside the Woolies branch in Chorlton-cum-Hardy, south Manchester, shortly after the news came through, a youth in a red sports shirt – Woolworth's uniform – began sweeping red boxes from one of the shelves.

"Sorry to hear your news," said a woman bringing a £12 heavy cotton-lined wicker linen basket to the till. "The staff were just told 10 minutes ago that all hope is gone," said the young man at the till, with heavy melodrama, demonstrating a sense of irony you might not have anticipated from a shop assistant at Woolies

Like the rest of the 25,000 staff he had been told by the firm's administrator, Deloitte, that if no offers for Woolworths were forthcoming, it was "possible that some stores may close before the end of December". So closure was not yet entirely definite but the closing down sale was.

Some of the customers looked as shocked as the staff. "I've come here for the past 20 years," said 63-year-old Joanna Jones, "I buy bits and pieces – things like tights and kitchenware and birthday cards. I like it because it's cheaper than other places but there's a good choice and it's a good price."

Its customers are loyal. "I've been coming here 25 years," says Joan Fletcher. "The staff are so lovely. I put the Lottery on or buy a tin of paint. I've come in the car, so I could have gone somewhere else but I've always used Woolies. "I feel devastated," says Mary Scott, a masseuse in her forties. "It's one of the worst news of the year. The Government is paying out billions for the banks; why can't it keep Woolies open? It's a great shop. I've been using Woolies since I was a kid. It's a real shame to see it go. I'd have used it more. if I'd known it was under threat."