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Wilko Employees: life after the collapse of the retail chain

A month on from the last Wilko closing its doors, I find out what the former employees are up to now.

Over half a century ago, the beloved retailer Wilko opened its doors for the first time. Starting off as a family run hardware store they expanded beyond anybody's expectations, opening over 400 stores while providing families with all of their essentials, from shower curtains to pick n' mix.

Fast forward to summer of 2023 and Britain's most loved hardware store is facing administration and job losses in the thousands at just over 400 stores across the UK. It created a high level of uncertainty for employees of the business as their future was in the hands of the administrators.

By October 8th, 2023, the final Wilko store had closed for good, making over 12,000 people redundant in the process. It's probably about now that I should mention I was actually one of them, however having only joined the business 3 months earlier I wasn't in a comparable situation to some of my colleagues.

Luke Manning, 19, had joined Wilko in May with it being his first job coming out of school a year prior. He said, "When I heard Wilko was going into administration, I was surprised at first, but the more I thought the more it became obvious." Luke's role was as a shop floor assistant so uncertainty would rise amongst us when we were replenishing the same area of the shop every day.

It took him almost a year to find his first job and over a month on from the closure of the store, Luke is back at square one. Lots of companies won't even look twice at a teenager's job application so it makes finding work even harder for people in that age range.

Steve had worked at Wilko for 15 years, spending several years as manager. He said, "It was a great place to work at, I had lovely colleagues... it felt really close knit." Employees picked up a lot of traction on social media during the closure, with videos of workers saying their farewells to the business going viral on TikTok. It highlighted how much Wilko meant to its employees.

"I was disappointed that a really successful company that I and many colleagues had given so much to was failing," said Steve.

Since leaving Wilko at the point of its closure, Steve has moved on to work as manager at Mark and Spencer in Oxford Street. "It is a lot more organised, with a large amount of personnel. There is also a lot of multi skilled team members."

Alison joined Wilko in December of 2022 as store manager, she was informed in January that they were depleting the role. When she found out administration was coming she said, "I was a bit apprehensive as I had just started to settle in as store manager."

Despite the hardships that Alison encountered at Wilko, she still has a positive outlook on how things happened. She described it as "fair for the task at hand" and "they were good to work for." Since the day of closing, Alison has returned back to her former employer, Card Factory. She spent 16 years there before joining Wilko at the end of last year.

With all 12,500 employees of Wilko being made redundant, we were given safety nets with a number of retailers supporting us and others giving us a guaranteed interview. There is also lifelines for some as they were instantly offered roles at the companies that took over. For example, Poundland has offered a number of workers a job at the store that they are taking over.

So, with all stores officially closed we can look back on Wilko very fondly. With it being loved by millions up and down the UK for decades, it always offered something, even when customers didn't realise they need it. From light bulbs and cheese graters to children's toys and notepads, Wilko and its family-like atmosphere will be missed by its employees and customers alike.

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