

How Patton Fit-out supplied the missing piece of Jigsaw

THE opening of the Victoria Square retail complex in Belfast has had a spin-off for the city centre by persuading one of the UK's leading fashion chains to come to the city.

Jigsaw, which designs its own ladies and children's fashion collections, began trading recently in the former Rankin café premises in Arthur Street.

Gary Phillips, project manager for the retailer, said his company, which has branches in 43 major towns throughout the UK, decided to open in Belfast because of the new Victoria Square centre.

"Victoria Square has big names which will attract our type of customer, but we deliberately did not go for a unit there as we like to cre-

LAURENCE WHITE



Commercial property

ate a more interesting shop and prefer the High Street to achieve this."

The new flagship Belfast Jigsaw

stocks the company's distinctive designer ladies wear and accessories. The company, also known for its distinctive shop fits, engaged Ballymena-based Patton Fit-Out, to create the interior of the new store which will be the first in a new style for the company.

Patton Fit-Out, winner of two national shop fit awards for excellence, turned the striking new store around in just eight weeks.

Project manager for Patton Fit-Out, Maurice Thompson said: "Jigsaw is breaking the mould with the design of this new store.

"It's a new look for them and certainly very idiosyncratic.

"It is contemporary in style with lime oak floors and walls finished

in bare plaster with a special sealer over the top. Our joinery division also made and supplied all the interior fixtures, which included shelving made from reclaimed wood."

Mr Phillips said: "This new store is not just a first for Belfast which is very exciting for the company, but also the first of a new style of shop for us.

"We have been delighted to work with Patton Fit-Out as they are a local company and also have a strong reputation for the quality of their work. They have done a first class job. We have plans for two flagship stores in Ireland, this one in Belfast and a new one in Dublin, which will hopefully be opened later this year."



Maurice Thompson, project manager of Patton Fit-Out with Gary Phillips, project manager for Jigsaw who made the pieces fit in Belfast's new Jigsaw store

Chance to give birth to a new franchise

A BELGIAN maternity, baby and childrenswear retailer is seeking franchise partners to open up shop in Northern Ireland.

Premaman, which also stocks an extensive range of baby accessories, operates from over 300 outlets in 36 countries and has 160 outlets in Belgium alone.

It trades from 11 retail outlets in the Republic, opening its first store in Dublin in 2006, and recently opened its first UK store at Crawley.

Now it is targeting key retailing locations here and is seeking to recruit a franchise partner in areas such as Belfast, Coleraine, Londonderry, Newry and Enniskillen.

Simon Phillips, managing director of MPM Premier Retail, the master franchisee for Premaman in the UK and Ireland, said the rapid growth in the local population in the last 10 years has opened up new retail opportunities for local business people.

"Suitable franchisee candidates should have the necessary skills and drive to run a strong retail business," he added.

The company designs clothes for children aged from newborn to 10 years as well as maternity wear.

The company also stocks a wide range of accessories such as pushchairs and car seats carrying the Premaman brand and other brands such as Jane, Guinny, Graco, Bebe, comfort and Hauck. Other accessories for feeding, sleeping, travel and bath time as well as toys are also stocked.

Dublin was selected as the company's first store site in these islands because of its young



The world is their oyster for property investors according to Michele McIlroy and Ross Gunning of Property Finders

Investors 'now band together'

WITH the housing market in Northern Ireland slowing down, more people are looking abroad to build up an investment property portfolio, according to one local company.

Property Finders, which has offices in Belfast and Bangor, has noted a new development since opening for business a year ago — the emergence of property syndicates.

Michele McIlroy, co-managing director of the company, said: "We have found that property syndicates have become very popular. The whole point of a syndicate is that a pool of investors can come together to invest in a specific project. It also means that people with a relatively modest sum to invest can be part of a project which would otherwise be out of their reach.

"Another attraction of this option is that it is Self Invested Per-

sonal Pension approved, allowing investors to maximise the return from their personal pensions."

France has proved the most popular destination for investors with the company due to stable market conditions and attractive incentives such as a tax rebate.

Michele said that countries joining the European Union such as Romania is another popular choice for investors.

Spain, the hot spot in the 1980s, is now best suited for purchasing a holiday home rather than investment returns and the US falls into the same category.

The company carries out all the paperwork on overseas investments and has its own in-house overseas mortgage specialist dealing directly with overseas banks.

It also has access to an international network of financial advisors, accountants and solicitors.

Developers given an eco-bully warning

PROPERTY developers across Northern Ireland are facing a serious threat from a Japanese invader.

The culprit in question is a plant — the Japanese knotweed — which is described by environmental consultants at White Young Green Ireland as "an ecological bully".

The weed can cause extensive damage to buildings and is so much of a threat to the environment that it is illegal to cause it to spread in the wild.

Now White Young Green is running training courses to help the

Dr Eleanor Ballard, senior ecologist with the consultancy firm, explained: "Japanese knotweed was introduced by adventurous Victorian gardeners who soon realised that it had a nasty side.

"It is an ecological bully that causes extensive damage to buildings as it can grow through mortar and tarmac with ease.

"It's a real scourge to the natural environment too, blocking the sunlight from our native plants. If you cause it to spread in the wild, you are breaking the law.

"We are advising developers that it's cheaper and less pro-

velopment process."

Dr Ballard said the weed is difficult to kill off.

"One application of weed killer will not solve the problem and we are working with a range of public and private sector organisations to identify the plant on their sites and produce management plans to assist in its removal," she added.

"We've also introduced training courses to help developers understand the risks that knotweed can cause to their new buildings and development plans and we advise people working on

