



HISTORIC EMPORIUMS

Capturing a sense of permanence, craftsmanship and nostalgia for a simpler time in the city, London's oldest shopfronts are a treasure trove of delights

WORDS EMMA J PAGE PHOTOGRAPHY RACHAEL SMITH

Whilst we may no longer be in the golden era of shopping, the pandemic has perhaps highlighted the resourcefulness of shopkeepers who have traded in exceptional circumstances, set up eye-catching 'pop up' stores in unusual settings or who have preserved the legacy of generations of family businesses and fine purveyors. Though many retailers have had to retreat online, there are still so many innovative as well as gloriously unexpected historic and contemporary shops that line our streets. "Shops offer a window into the interior life of the city, reflecting our own passions back to us," says author of *London Shop Fronts*, Emma J Page. "Shops remain the lifeblood of our city," she continues, "squeezed by the virtual world, yes, and sometimes at the mercy of an area's changing fortunes, but ultimately an enduring – and beautiful – expression of a dynamic capital and its rich history." Here, we explore some of the most historic London shopfronts and celebrate their unique stories.

BERRY BROS & RUDD

Historic wine merchant

It is a feat to maintain a largely unaltered shopfront through three centuries, but for London's original wine and spirits merchant, little has changed since these two Georgian terraced houses (*above*) were conjoined. Elegant, arcaded windows are inset into a timber facade, giving way to a wood-panelled, listed interior, complete with original shelving and fittings.

Now known for its vast stock of more than 4,000 wines, the shop began life as a grocer's and coffee house, started by a woman known only as 'Widow Bourne'. Original coffee weighing scales still hang from the ceiling, part of a number of dusty artefacts that have accumulated here through the centuries. For years, these scales were also used to weigh fashionable visitors, including Lord Byron.

The shop is still run by Bourne's descendants, who have largely resisted displaying their wares. Wines and spirits are carefully stowed in the basement, giving the store-cum-office, with its tables and counters, the air of an old-fashioned consulting room. These days, a modern, fully stocked shop around the corner satisfies those who prefer to examine the labels. "Though we've contemporised our business, aesthetically, very little has changed," says Geordie Willis, eighth generation of the Berry family. "In fact, we took a paint sample from the original facade, which was beneath decades' worth of layers of paint. The green-black colour you can see today is a replica of the original."

FLORIS

Family-run perfumery

Few shops in London can claim to have occupied the same spot for nearly 300 hundred years, even less to have remained in the hands of one family, but British perfumery Floris has passed through nine generations of scent makers, and still displays its perfumes in the glass-fronted Spanish mahogany cabinets that the family acquired from London's Great Exhibition in 1851.

The building was originally home to founder and Minorcan émigré Juan Famenias Floris and his wife Elizabeth. The couple started selling perfume, combs and shaving products in 1730, inspired by the area's reputation for enterprise. Isaac Newton had famously lived in the house next door, and over the years the premises harboured several notable faces. Admiral Lord Nelson kept a room on the third floor for his mistress Lady Emma Hamilton; Oscar Wilde regularly stocked up on products; and Cary Grant enjoyed frequent pilgrimages to the store.

The shopfront was adorned with stucco work in the early nineteenth century, and the Royal Warrant that Floris received from King George IV in 1820 is still affixed and in mint condition. Though the interior of the shop was recently renovated, little has changed. The main perfume counter remains the star of the show, and ninth-generation perfumer Edward Bodenham (*pictured above*) runs the family firm, along with his father and sister. ▶



BRAMBLE & MOSS

Florist

The full history of this ornate Victorian shopfront is, tantalisingly, just out of reach. Its mosaic doorstep is inscribed with 'Blanchford', and a recent restoration of its fascia led to the discovery of original, carved, once-gilded lettering revealing it to have been a chemist – but that is as much as can be gleaned of the building's early life. The facade, with its elegantly curved windows, was likely added to the existing building around 1850; the same time the mysterious Blanchford is thought to have set up shop.

By the time florists Ella Sarafian and Jo Antrabus moved in from the tiny store next door, a multitude of businesses had occupied the premises – from a wine shop to a picture framer's and fabric specialist's. Ella and Jo commissioned Ash Bishop of The Brilliant Sign Co to craft new signage, and he settled on a bespoke type based on a Victorian fascia he had seen on a Brighton pub. With a technique called glue chipping, he designed an inscribed plate-glass fascia finished with gold leaf. "Victorians were innovative and entrepreneurial when it came to their shopfronts, quickly championing plate glass when it became available," he says. "It was a way of showing modernity and celebrating craftsmanship." This vintage-style signage remains the shop's calling card, complemented by original stained-glass panels and a Victorian forest-green tile surround: a palette perfectly suited to the display of flowers, plants, foliage and vintage vessels.



ICONIC SHOPS

PAXTON & WHITFIELD

England's oldest cheesemonger

Though its roots date back to a 1742 market stall in Aldwych, this historic shop has been sited at St James's Jermyn Street since 1835. The business was appointed cheesemonger to Queen Victoria in 1850 and has held many Royal Warrants since. Its fortunes have fluctuated over the last two centuries: during the 1940s it even reinvented itself as a grocer, because eggs, butter and cheese were in short supply.

Much of the brand's records were destroyed in a warehouse fire some years ago, but there is anecdotal evidence that poet Lord Byron dropped in regularly to stock up, whilst the store's offering was a favourite of Winston Churchill's. By the early nineteenth century, this enclave was becoming known for its array of shoemakers and outfitters, with several of its buildings featuring shops on the ground floor and lodgings above.

These days, the store matures and sells artisan cheeses from the UK and Europe. Managing director James Rutter travels across the globe on sourcing trips, but he retains a soft spot for the original premises and intimate, low-ceilinged rooms. "When I walk down Jermyn Street and spot the black-and-gold shopfront, I'm always struck by the sturdiness of the shop's appearance after all this time," he says. The basement now houses state-of-the-art maturing rooms: a fitting addition for a cheesemonger that sells up to six and a half tonnes of Stilton each December alone. ▶



POSTCARD TEAS

Specialist dedicated to small-estate teas

Tea may well have been in the DNA of this Georgian townhouse shop since it first opened its doors. Nestled on a Mayfair side street, it once belonged to grocer John Robinson – who is thought to have added its timber-framed square bay windows in the early 1800s – at a time when tea was on the cusp of becoming a national beverage. By the 1950s, it had become a quaint tearoom called Mrs Green's, complete with net drapes at its windows and a white-painted facade.

Today, thanks to the expertise of current owner Timothy d'Offay (pictured far left), the shop offers a considered selection of small-estate teas sourced from China, Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Vietnam, each labelled with its maker's name and origin – a first in the world of tea-selling.

In the window, a large brass teapot, formerly the shop sign of a nineteenth-century Dutch tea merchant, acts as an unofficial logo, whilst unobtrusive glass shelving showcases a precious selection of Japanese teaware. Signwriter Philip Surey, who has produced designs for HMS Victory and Westminster Abbey, created the exterior's fine gilt lettering.



L CORNELISSEN

Fine art materials shop

Founded by Louis Cornelissen, a Flemish lithographer who lived in Paris before fleeing to London to escape civil unrest, this treasure trove of creative materials began life in 1855. Originally intended to supply engravers and lithographers, the shop has evolved to serve the needs of artists, illustrators, calligraphers, gilders and signwriters. In 1987, it was re-sited to this early Victorian building in a street close to the British Museum. The premises were once occupied by Augustus Pugin, the architect of the Palace of Westminster.

“We recreated the atmosphere of the original store when we moved,” says owner Nicholas Walt, who finished the new facade in the brand’s trademark holly-bush green, complemented by 22-carat gold lettering. Inside, 150 numbered mahogany Victorian drawers from the former store have been carefully arranged. They contain an intriguing blend of specialist products, including watercolours, gold leaf, etching tools, dippers and empty tubes for colour-makers.

This is a store that invites people to linger, examining shelf after shelf of brushes, pencils, paints and papers, many of which are also artistically displayed in the window to entice in both specialists and passers-by.

From the pigments found in his studio at his death, it is known that Francis Bacon used Cornelissen’s Rose Madder – proof that this shop has inspired many decades of artists, providing both the sketchpads of amateurs and the palettes of professionals.

HATCHARDS

Historic Bookseller

Reportedly the UK’s oldest bookshop, this store started life as a book-laden trolley in Piccadilly in the hands of publisher John Hatchard. By the early 1800s, he’d found a permanent site on the street, establishing the largest book trading business in London within just four years.

Aesthetically, not much has changed since the shop was rebuilt in the early 1900s. Its classic fascia, complete with an imprint of Hatchard’s signature and prominent Royal Warrant, remains intact, despite the store having expanded into the premises next door. Inside, a wide oak staircase cuts through five carpeted floors, while round Georgian tables piled high with books lend a homely air. Among them, is the tea table where Oscar Wilde once sat correcting proofs of *Oscariana*, his book of maxims. One floor, not yet given over to public access, is devoted to second-hand books. The top floor is used for unpacking. ‘Yes, the books travel all the way to the top of the building on arrival, only to spread their way back down again,’ says manager and bibliophile Francis Cleverdon.

Tradition is important to this heritage bookseller – every few years, when it’s time for a refresh, there’s a scramble to retrieve the colour code for the shopfront’s specific shade of forest green. And its approach to books, from bestsellers to rare prints, stays perfectly in tune. ‘Books are objects in their own right,’ says Francis. ‘We are not so much guided by cover price as by the idea of a truly good read – whatever the genre.’



ICONIC SHOPS



LOCK & CO

London’s oldest hatters

Known for inventing the world-famous bowler hat, this family-owned business was founded nearly 350 years ago and moved into its current premises, a former coffee house, in 1759. “If you stand in the middle of Little St James Street, just opposite, you’ll see how much the building has shifted to the right,” says family member Nigel Macdonald. “The building retains its original wooden frame underneath a brick facade, and is slowly leaning into its neighbour.”

The fact that the premises are still intact is a minor miracle. During the Second World War, a bomb made a clean cut straight through the roof and into the basement without exploding – this is all the more remarkable given that the basement was full of ammunition stored there by nearby gunmaker William Evans. The dent the bomb created is still visible today.

The building’s most impressive original feature is an oak ‘coffin’ staircase, so called because it was designed to allow caskets to be lowered through the stairwell’s open centre from the residential floors above. Though rooted in history, a modern outlook is key to this store’s longevity: recent collaborations with Vivienne Westwood and Mr Porter have imbued this classic brand with a new kind of cool. ■



FURTHER READING
London Shop Fronts by Emma J Page and Rachael Smith, £22.95, published by Hoxton Mini Press, hoxtonminipress.com

Visit the shops listed here:
Berry Bros & Rudd, SW1A 1EG; *Bramble & Moss*, TW10 6UB; *Floris*, SW1Y 6JH; *Hatchards*, W1J 9LE; *L Cornelissen & Son*, WC1B 3RY; *Lock & Co*, SW1A 1EF; *Postcard Teas*, W1S 1AG; *Paxton & Whitfield* SW1Y 6JE