

Top Tens

Small but Perfectly Formed: Top of the Shops

by Judith Schrut

When Napoleon famously called Britain a nation of shopkeepers it wasn't meant to be a compliment. Nonetheless, Brits have embraced the phrase as their own and something to be proud of. Like the USA, Britain boasts a great tradition of 'Ma and Pa' stores, where ordinary folk earned an honest living and put the whole family to work, rising early and finishing late to ply their wares and better their lot. Small specialist stores have long been part of the British shop-scape, although nowadays you may have to look a little harder to find the gems. In this issue's Top Tens we salute our pick of these small but perfectly formed treasures.

1. ART WITH HEART

From prehistoric cave art to wood carving, we humans have followed our urge to paint, decorate, gouge, tattoo or self-bejewel for time immemorial. No doubt our ancient ancestors would have appreciated a branch cave of **Cass Art** in their neighbourhood. For the past 30 years this top specialist arts store, with its uplifting motto "Let's fill this town with artists", has been on an unabashed mission to furnish art, stationery and craft supplies to Britain's creative masses. Founding father Mark Cass comes from a family with deep art connections,

Cass Art, Islington



going back generations to Great Uncle Paul, entrepreneurial art dealer and champion to the French Impressionists. More recently the Cass family founded Image Bank UK and the influential Cass Sculpture Foundation.

With six London shops, a huge online warehouse and new stores planned across the UK, Cass Art prides itself on price, range, quality and, most importantly, fun. Whether you're a honed hobbyist, budding Botticelli or just looking for something crafty for that rainy day, you'll find whatever your arty heart desires here.

The best place to start is the flagship Islington store where you'll gaze in imaginative wonder at the smorgasbord of sketchbooks and spray paints, glitters and glues, pens, pastels, papers and art kits displayed over three vast floors, from a top floor crammed with frames, canvasses and mini-manikins to a basement devoted entirely to kids. You'll also find a full calendar of talks, shows and creative activities for all ages and bulletin boards with competitions, courses and items for sale. Look out too for Cass Art's famed 80%-off sales, special offers and price matching guarantee as well as its knowledgeable and passionate staff, all of whom are artists themselves.

Further information:

www.cassart.co.uk

2. BODACIOUS BROLLIES

James Smith & Sons has been making and selling umbrellas, walking sticks and canes since Victorian times and is the oldest shop of

its kind in the world. This beautiful shop at the less fashionable end of London's Oxford Street is an invitation to step back in time, with its original frontage and fittings unaltered since it opened almost 200 years ago.

Smith & Sons has always been a family business where the rich, famous and wet of the day have shopped for their essential brollies and sticks. The original Mr Smith made all his goods in a workshop out back. A select bespoke few are handmade there still, although today's stock is mostly factory produced.

But what an incredible variety that is! There are umbrellas of all shapes, sizes and materials, from solid sticks, fit ups and handmade classics to tartan folders, Malacca cane crooks and several more intriguing items like a Knirps Pocketsized Fiber Automatic. There's a tasty range of animal headed umbrellas cats, ducks, blue crystal parrots and an adorable ruffled owl for ladies; toucans, snakes and dinosaurs for gents. You'll find a jolly nice line in carved



Umbrellas for all types of rain, photo courtesy James Smith & Sons

wooden Sherlock Holmes brollies complete with pipe and deerstalker hat, enjoying particularly brisk popularity of late thanks to BBC's *Sherlock*.

If you yearn for a bespoke broolly but come from a land of little rain, do not despair. Smith & Son's staff will eagerly guide you through the shop's lovely range of Sunbrellas, including a charming classic white frilly ruffled number embroidered with the elegant James Smith logo.

If you prefer rambles to rain, the shop's walking stick collection is full of delights: handmade sticks in every wood imaginable, with gizmos and gadgets and heights to order, sticks with corkscrews or secret dice compartments, drinking sticks complete with two glasses and tiny flask, and a tempting contraption known as a hillrest seatstick- a folding cane with a comfy padded seat ready to open out when you've reached that scenic mountaintop. There's even a pipestick, whose handle unscrews to form a briar pipe- a perfect match for that Sherlock Holmes umbrella.

Further information:
www.james-smith.co.uk

3. GIVE THANKS FOR HANKS

Longing for the rock guitar of your dreams? A Gibson *Jimi Hendrix Psychedelic Flying V* maybe? Lusting after that vintage Marshall amplifier or handbuilt Germanium fuzz pedal, or have a spare 1960's Fender *Stratocaster* you need valued? Or just fancy a go on an Ibanez *Joe Satriani Silver Surfer*?

Look no further than **Hanks Guitar Shop**. A guitar lover's paradise, Hanks inhabits one of the oldest buildings on legendary Denmark Street, London's *Tin Pan Alley* and home to many of Britain's most famous songwriters, musicians and music publishers.



Shane and his merry band at Hanks Guitars

The Sex Pistols lived and recorded above Number 6 and the Kinks, Rolling Stones and Donovan are amongst those who bought their first instrument or made historic recordings in studios along this street, most now long gone.

The tiny shop's four space-defying floors hum with hundreds of acoustic, electric, classical and vintage guitars from all over the world. They hang from every square inch of wall, ceiling, door or floor space, just waiting to be stroked, taken home and loved. You'll also find amps, capos, strings, straps, mandolins and banjos, as well as some adorable ukuleles in a rainbow of colours. Even the shop's wallpaper invites you to walk down British rock history memory lane.

Hanks caters for all budgets and tastes. Its most popular seller is a very affordable *Brian May*, but many customers are looking for unique models like the acoustic *Elvis Presley* with its elegant rosewood body, leather scalloped braces and Elvis silhouette inlaid in pearl.

Hanks prides itself on being a real shop for real people with human values, so whether you're searching for your very first *Stratocaster* or something rather more special, manager Shane and his merry band of passionate, friendly staff promise to find it for you. Shane confessed that his biggest thrill is starting customers off on their journey into guitar playing (and lessons are available on site). Staff are always on the look out to purchase, display and sell interesting guitars.

Unsurprisingly, plenty of celebrity customers visit Hanks every week. We understand Johnny Depp, Peter Dinklage and Arcade Fire have all popped by recently for a serious strum or to pick up a plectrum.

Further information:
www.hanksguitarshop.com



Sensational scents from Angela Flanders Perfumers, Spitalfields

4. SENSATIONAL SCENTS

A few years ago, archaeologists in Cyprus uncovered the world's oldest perfumery, dating back 4000 years. Although not quite so ancient, the traditional art of perfume-making in London's East End is a long and strong one.

Angela Flanders has been creating her unique handmade perfumes along traditional lines for over 25 years. You'll sense Angela's powerful personality and spirit the moment you walk into either of her two East End shops, lovingly restored to reflect their Victorian origins, or wear one of her perfumes. Customers are utterly spoilt for choice with over 40 original fragrances from which to choose, each the product of Angela's imagination and energy, blended and made with her own hands. Many are born from her passion for history and inspired by historical events or old perfume recipes.

Tuberose and jasmine-rich *Precious One* is a particular customer favourite and has won awards in the perfume world. For spring and summer, Angela's citrus and florals are especially popular, scents like *Mandarin and Mint*, made from 100% natural essential oils and based on a medieval recipe, or *Millefleur*, a summer's day in a bouquet of roses, violets and lavender. For winter there are deeper, sweeter orientals and woods such as *Cashmere Noire* or the extraordinary *Aqua Alba*, an innovative and intriguing blend which evokes heather, honey, cool forests and peat smoke. If you find it challenging to choose from this stunning collection, Angela's sample service or a private consultation can help find your perfect scent. Angela has also created a luxurious home range including traditional French moth bags, a blend of spices and herb oils laced with a fragrant mist, gorgeous linen, room and pillow sprays and exceptional perfumed candles.

Customers will find some alluring treats

from Angela in 2014, such as her latest perfume, *Breath of Hope*, its uplifting florals inspired by a friend's poem. And we are thrilled Angela chose to share exclusively with *American in Britain* readers that, in dedication to a burgeoning male clientele, her focus this year will be on men, including a trilogy of new masculine fragrances "just for the boys".

Further information:

www.angelaflanders-perfumer.com

5. ALL THE TRIMMINGS

What could Captain James Cook, ex-US President Harry Truman, and *Robinson Crusoe* author Daniel Defoe possibly have in common?

Give up? The answer is *haberdashery*. This impressive word is not heard much nowadays, but back in the Middle Ages haberdashers were one of the most important guilds in town. Haberdashers were everywhere, supplying the medieval world with needles and pins, ribbons and beads, purses, gloves and trim. *The Worshipful Company of Haberdashers* remains one of London's top livery companies although its role is now mainly charitable.

Fortunately for today's haberdashery hounds there's **VV Rouleaux**, an enchanting shop in London's Marylebone Village. VVR, as it's affectionately known, has the biggest selection of ribbons and trimming in Europe as well as being a treasure trove for feathers, flowers, tassels and textile bits and bobs from the four corners of the haberdashery world.

Founder Annabel Lewis and her fabulous staff are clearly passionate about colour, and on the damp, dull winter's day of our visit the shop was a joyous refuge of colour and light. Starting working life as a florist, Annabel got

fed up waking at 3.30 every morning to go to the market to buy flowers, so decided to open a shop selling the best selection of ribbons in as many shades, textures and types as she could find. Ribbon lovers can choose from VVR's top selling grosgrain (ribbed) ribbon in 45 colours and 6 widths to satin ribbon in 80 colours and 9 widths. You'll also find velvets, suedes, organdies and wire edged trim. For weddings, VVR's luxurious silk satin offerings in 20 colours and 7 widths are irresistible, and stylish hats, headdresses and masks can all be made to order.

VVR has become shop of choice for ribbons and trimmings for theatre, TV and film productions especially period pieces. Its haberdashery recently featured in *Alice in Wonderland*, *Harry Potter* and *Anna Karenina*. If you are inspired by a visit to VV Rouleaux and want to create a feathered Venetian mask, ribbon flowers or a beaded and bejewelled bridal veil of your own, you can sign up for one of its tempting day courses. Annabel is looking forward to opening a VVR School in the near future.

Further information:

www.vvrouleaux.com (also known as the *Hip Haberdasher*)

6. BROUGHT TO BOOK

The Internet age has not been kind to the small bookshops of our world. Online shopping, big bookseller discounts and BOGOFs, *Kindle* and other e-books have all contributed to the demise of many small players. But independent bookshops are fighting back, evolving to survive and often in interesting and innovative ways.

A Rosetta Stone's throw from the British Museum you'll find the **London Review**

Bookshop. A refuge for book lovers who also enjoy browsing, talking, daydreaming and eating cake, LRB sees itself as the modern answer to London's lost tradition of literary coffee houses. Its passion for the written word includes a full calendar of customer events, top author debates, translation Masterclasses and some blissful baked treats.

Those who prefer their bookshop experience in a rural setting sprinkled with stunning country views should head for Alfriston village, tucked into Sussex's famed chalky white cliffs and home to **Much Ado Books**.

In addition to all the new and secondhand volumes a bookish heart could desire-- with a distinct emphasis on the Bloomsbury Group who wrote and romped nearby - Much Ado runs loads of wonderful events and workshops, stocks a huge collection of greeting cards for every mood or occasion and offers a unique range of Recovered Notebooks, one-of-a-kinds made from recycled book jackets. Charleston House and its wondrous gardens are only a few miles away and worth a detour for Bloomsbury fans and garden lovers alike. Bookworms are also well-catered for in nearby Lewes and Brighton.

For book shopping mixed with literary history, we heartily recommend **P&G Wells** in Winchester, the delightfully historic Hampshire town where Jane Austen lived, died, and is buried in the magnificent Cathedral. There are also rich literary connections worth exploring in the Cotswolds including TS Eliot, Shakespeare and Laurie Lee. **Jaffé & Neale** in Chipping Norton carries their works and many other gems in its lovely natural light-filled bookshop and café. When the sun is out, complement your browsing with an excellent cup of coffee on the shop's Cotswold Stone front terrace. London's 'villages' too have charming local bookshops, like **Daunt Books** in Marylebone, **Village Books** in Dulwich and the marvellous **Muswell Hill Children's Bookshop**, this year celebrating its 40th birthday.

Further information:

<http://muchadobooks.com>
www.lrb.co.uk

7. HANDMADE WITH LOVE

Britain's country towns and villages are fabulous places to find unique shops selling handcrafted clothes, toys, jewellery and household items. Sherborne (Dorset), Truro (Cornwall) and Hebden Bridge (Yorkshire), are just a few picturesque towns delightfully dotted with artisan shops. If you're visiting the Cotswolds, don't miss the wonderful Cirencester Craft Market. There are superb craft fairs taking place throughout the year, like Devon's Contemporary Crafts Festival (June), Cornwall's Design Fair (August), Made



Rejoicing with ribbons at VV Rouleaux, Marylebone



Norfolk's Bluejacket Workshop

London (October), and Made by Hand, Wales (November).

Bluejacket Workshop in North Norfolk, a couple hours' drive from Cambridge, is one artisan stop worth a special mention. If any excuse is needed to visit and enjoy the beautiful local coastal scenery and wildlife we think you'll find this a good one. The Workshop is run by the Hamond family, whose strong connections to the sea and region go back many generations. Ned's a carpenter and antique restorer, making everything from children toys to chandeliers. Roberta, who's originally from New York, is a handknitter. Son Nick is a furniture maker, creating beautiful pieces from all kinds of wood as well as Victorian cider barrels, driftwood and old railway carriages. Wendy Watt makes hats, Saffron Paffron restores furnishings and creates magical textile pieces and a host of quality local makers and artists showcase their work throughout the year, powered by a labour of love and endlessly inspired by the surrounding land and sea scapes.

Bluejacket feels more like a cosy art gallery than a shop. As well as displaying original rugs, jewellery, furniture, toys, knitwear and ceramics, Bluejacket hosts an autumn Textile Fair featuring specialists in modern and vintage textile work and a Christmas Fair. All events come with free coffee, tea and homemade cakes except the Christmas Fair which focuses on mulled wine, hot chocolate, homemade sausages and mince pies. There's even a cosy B&B and camp on site should you wish to extend your visit.

Further information:

Bluejacketworkshop.co.uk
cotswoldcraftmarket.co.uk

8. HARDWARE HEAVEN

If your New Year's resolution to replace those broken drawer and door handles or fix up that valuable antique lamp inherited from Great Aunt Selma have been thwarted because you can't find the right bits for the job, don't despair - we know a hardware store that sells just what you are looking for.

Astonishingly, in our age of pile'em high, sell'em cheap DIY superstores, small family-run hardware shops, (traditionally called ironmongers in the UK) are thriving-- with over 14,000 in the US alone. These are not merely toyshops for the DIY-obsessed or a rare source of screws and glues, brushes and bulbs, knobs and knockers no longer available anywhere else, but the best place to get friendly advice from a human being on how to get those niggly household jobs done.

Penton & Sons in London's Marylebone is a great example of this and a member of the GOSH (Good Old School) group of small hardware retailers. First opened in 1841 to a very different world, Pentons has survived through thick and thin due to traditional values like personal service and top quality products. It even has the evocative must and metal smell of an old fashioned hardware store, the kind you may remember visiting with your Dad when you were a child.

Manager Cliff treated us to a top-to-bottom grand tour of this Aladdin's cave of drawers, shelves, hooks and nooks, stocking hundreds

of home-helpful items from butlers' gloves to the legendary box of fork handles. Bestsellers include more than 100 kinds of light bulb, cleaning products for every surface and orifice and over 50 kinds of brushes, brooms and dusters like a book brush, computer brush, goat's hair wooden floor broom, a tin boxed set of shoe brushes and our personal favourite, the genuine ostrich feather duster. Did you know that naturally dust trapping, eco-friendly non-animal harming ostrich feathers are best for dusting and may even change your life?

Pentons' regulars come from far and near and include the big department stores on nearby Oxford Street whose staff often drop by for duct tape, drip catching buckets or certain kind of screws. This being Marylebone, there are also plenty of celebrity clients. But Cliff was keen to point out that this isn't just a 'toys for the boys' shop; in 15 years as manager he's noticed a huge rise in female customers. We think that's everything to do with Cliff and his lovely staff, who clearly make it their business to be as accessible and non-intimidating as possible.

Further information:

www.pentonshardware.co.uk

9. SAY IT WITH SILVER

Beaver away, deep in the underground maze of London's Silver Vaults, a unique arcade of 30 shops and the world's largest centre for modern and antique silver, you'll find the charming and knowledgeable Joel Langford of **Langfords Silver**. The Langfords have been in the silver trade for several generations and are founding members of the Vaults. Like most Silver Vault traders, Langfords is a family business, passing knowledge, expertise and passion from generation to generation.



Fork handles and all kinds of brushes, Pentons Hardware



Saying it with silver, Joel Langford & friend, London Silver Vaults

The shop attracts silver shoppers from across the globe although for many years the most popular customers by far were Americans. (Joel's mother is American and Joel was born in Los Angeles). During World War II, US military officers came looking for presents for their wives and girlfriends, and later came back to shop with them. Langfords counts royalty,

Hollywood legends and serious collectors amongst its customers but equally welcomes first time buyers and window shoppers. Joel believes the family's key to success is down to the personal, friendly and expert service given to every client.

As well as quality contemporary silver design and bespoke pieces created for customers' exact requirements, Langfords carries antique silver-somethings from all eras, from ornate Georgian candelabras to ivory and gilt chess sets, from coffee spoons, lobster picks and grape shears to Victorian silver galleons in full sail (a snip at £68,000), each piece impressed with a hallmark to show maker, date and purity. Amongst the more extraordinary pieces sold over the years was a full-size suite of pure Indian silver antique furniture. Langfords also buys, restores, values and engraves.

Further information:
www.langfords.com

10. KITCHEN AND CABOODLE

Divertimenti, with shops in London's Knightsbridge and Marylebone, has long been paradise for the serious cook, with bakeware, cookware and kitchenware for any meal, method or occasion. Here's the place for strainers and stockpots, trolleys and tagines,

mezzalunas, moulis and multi-coloured muffin cases. There's eyecatching tableware in every conceivable colour, shape and style including that sauceboat or seafood bubble glass of your dreams and a range of knives that would make even Julia Child tremble. You'll need several hours just to browse Divertimenti's cookbook collection.

As well as all that splendid kitchenware, Divertimenti runs a celebrated Cookery School with an exceptional range of options, from multi-part courses covering all your cook'n bake basics to hands-on Masterclasses and exclusive Chef's Table events featuring Michelin starred chefs. There are also wine and beer tasting classes, joyful foodie walks known as *Gastro Tours*, Growing Gourmet cooking workshops for children plus many other imaginative learning events such as a *Perfecting Pastry Weekend*, *Curing for the Modern Cook*, *Smashing Plates* and *One Wok Wonders*.

Further information:
www.divertimenti.co.uk

This is the latest in our featured series of Top Tens for Americans in Britain. If you've got a hot Top Ten tip to share with our readers, we'd love to hear from you.

Contact Judith at judith0777@gmail.com.