

THE INSIDE STORY

Alice Wright uncovers the story behind four successful Truro fashion independents

Opium

6 Nalders Court, Truro, Cornwall TR1 2XH

Opium owner Poppy Roberts originally intended to be an actress. But after touring the country with theatre companies for three years, she soon realised her real passion lay in retail and clothing. “I wanted to return home and introduce Truro to a feminine collection of clothing and gifts,” she says.

Opium opened in the spring of 2006 in Nalders Court, an established independent shopping area. “Truro is a sprawling city with lots of lanes and alleys” Roberts says. “So while I was unable to afford a prime position on the high street, it was important to find an area people already visited.”

Her store has a French feel with sumptuous drapes, antique tables and

dressers used to display knitwear, jeans, jewellery, lingerie and gifts. Its key labels include the likes of Odd Molly, Noa Noa, Avoca and Baby Ceylon. Meanwhile, Roberts says Day Birger et Mikkelsen and Marilyn Moore are her “bestsellers” and reveals Katya Wildman’s Bombshell dress “flew off the rails” last season.

The owner prides herself on offering a personal – and honest – service. And although Opium has a website, Roberts doesn’t currently sell online, but allows customers to purchase anything they’ve spotted over the phone. While the owner says this “seems to work well,” she would eventually like the store to have a bigger online presence.

Business-wise, Roberts says



customers still seem to be spending despite the economic climate – albeit in a more controlled way. “Luckily on the whole most of my customers still want to treat themselves,” she says. “And for those who are a bit more cautious we have introduced more accessories such as tights and belts.”

Bishop Phillpott

**Castle Lodge, 10 Castle Street
Truro, Cornwall TR1 3AF**

Sharon Smith has owned Bishop Phillpott for just over two months but the shop has been in business for 15 years. Originally located on Lemon Quay, it moved to its current location in Castle Lodge, on Castle Street, six years ago.

Smith began working at the boutique part-time last year and when the two previous owners decided to sell up, she says it seemed like the perfect opportunity. “It’s been very full on and exciting,” she says. “I’ve really been thrown in at the deep end.”

The store’s key labels include Paul Smith, Vivienne Westwood, Nicole Farhi and Sportmax, which Smith says appeals to her target customer who is typically “high end and aged 35 plus.”

She says: “A lot of our customers



are probably older ladies with more disposable income.” However, the owner quickly adds that stocking labels such as J Brand Jeans also tempt younger shoppers in: “My daughter’s 23 and she loves the clothes.”

The attractive Castle Lodge building also contains a cafe and a hair salon, making it a destination in itself. But, as it is a little out of the main city centre, Smith says one of the biggest challenges is letting people know they’re there. “We have a very good regular customer base but it’s trying to attract new people and knowing who to spend your money on advertising



with,” she says.

One priority is setting up a website for the shop. Meanwhile the boutique will be introducing a new Italian perfume in November, which is only available in a handful of stores nationwide. “We’re constantly trying to find things that are more exclusive and that not everybody else has,” she concludes.

Melange Fashion

**Nalders Court, Pydar Street
Truro Cornwall TR1 2XH**

Having originally trained as a hairdresser, Melange owner Debbie Wilson always harboured an interest in clothes and fabric. So when she saw new shops being developed in Nalders Court in the '80s, she decided to take the plunge and open her own boutique. "I felt there was an opening for an independent shop in Truro," she says. "My feet didn't touch the ground. I went from just viewing them to taking on a 25 year lease."

Over the 22 years Wilson has been running Melange Fashion, she says the city has seen many changes. The most major was after Marks and Spencer moved from its previous nearby location to its current spot on Lemon Quay, which Wilson says took the "hub" of the city away from her shop.

Another constant challenge cited by the owner is the competition against the multiples. "You've got to try to



give over and above their service," she says, adding that her store offers free alterations and other "personal touches" to set it apart.

"Ladies aged over 40 years are my target audience," Wilson says. "Someone who wants classic, quality clothes, but with a fashionable twist. I work really hard to find something that's a bit different."

Melange Fashion's collections include Basier, Lucia and Marcona. Meanwhile, to complement them, Wilson also stocks a range of hats and costume jewellery.



Cargo Clothing

**7 Nalders Court, Truro
Cornwall TR1 2XH**

Husband and wife team Matt and Sue Stuart are the brains behind occasion wear indie and e-tailer Cargo Clothing. Sue gave up her job as a personal assistant 11 years ago to start the business. And three years later, when she fell pregnant with their first child, Matt decided to give up work so they could focus on the business together and share childcare.

To begin with, Cargo Clothing specialised in what Matt describes as street wear. "The main turnover was in jeans but gradually it has got much dressier," he says. "Initially it was with labels like Lipsy but the more we touched on it the more we felt there was a need for it – from casual dresses to full on ball and pageant gowns."

While teenage customers keep the shop busy around prom-time, Matt



says their customer base is very broad. "We do a lot of 18 and twenty-first birthday dresses but we're also popular for Christmas parties and hunt balls. Whether the customer's aged 15 to 55, we cover it all."

According to the Stuarts, Lipsy and Closet are at the less expensive end of their store's collection while higher end labels include Sherri Hill and Pia Michi.



Matt acknowledges that they would get much more business if they were on a main street, but says – along with having to pay higher rates – they would also lose part of what makes them special. "We're doing very individual dresses," he says. "We don't want to have a huge turnover or the dresses cease being individual. We'd rather be an exclusive boutique where people get something a bit different."