



# STREETS AHEAD

Mark Neilson shops around in Edinburgh.

Ewan Halley

**D**ID you know that there's a Christmas shop in Edinburgh which is open 365 days a year – including Christmas Day? Must be Santa's day job. Or do you know where to find Karma Woman, with its designer clothes for the fuller figure; or Fabulous Fakes, for its costume jewellery; or Tattie Shaw's, for its fresh fruit and vegetables from around the world; or Concrete Butterfly, for its

contemporary furniture and accessories by Scottish and overseas designers? Can you even guess what is sold in Halibut and Herring . . . ?

Small independent shops make up a rich slice of Edinburgh's retail sector, and are found not merely along the well-trodden tourist miles, but in every cul de sac and back street of the city. If you're searching for something truly out-of-

the-ordinary, then you are more likely to find it on an independent trader's shelf than in a High Street chainstore.

Once we were "a nation of small shopkeepers", now our independents face a struggle to survive. In any small town or village, the introduction of a big superstore can wipe out long-established local names, and make charity shops the new growth industry in the main

*Edinburgh's Bruntsfield Place, a haven for small, independent shops.*

street. In cities like Edinburgh, ever stricter parking regulations divert potential customers off to out-of-city Retail Parks.

Independent shops are a threatened species: they make up between 70% and 80% of all small business failures. Some of this carnage is self-inflicted: too many shops are opened without proper homework to establish what the market wants, or how many competitors are already cutting each other's throats. And most are launched on impossibly optimistic sales forecasts, coupled with badly underestimated running costs, so that the venture runs out of capital before it attracts enough customers through its doors to underpin survival.

But the main threat, even to established and successful independents, is our lazy and unthinking shopping habits. If we don't go back to using our feet and exercising our curiosity, then we might soon be left with nothing outside the bland and boring High Streets that you see in every town.

One man is doing his best to redress the balance. Ewan Halley, of Motto Publishing, has just produced *The Edinburgh Independent Shop Guide* which identifies a wide range of different small shops in the city. Each shop is listed by category – such as gifts, antiques, art, flowers, clothing, children, etc – and its



*Ewan Halley.*

Mark Neilson

exact position is shown on a series of street maps at the end of the Guide.

You can plan your shopping expedition by picking a category, e.g. accessories, and selecting a shop like Rene Walrus (reference 10B), then simply flick to map B, find that number 10 is on St Mary's Street, off Cowgate . . . and head there. Alternatively, you can sit over a civilised coffee in Rose Street, look at Map C, New Town then flick back to find out what the nearest numbers to your table (27C, 169C, 256C), are selling . . . in effect, plan your expedition, with an eye to the state of your feet.

The Edinburgh Independent Shop Guide caters for every age and taste: it is a fascinating anthology of independent shops from Polish delicatessens (Deli Polonia, 121G) to kite specialists (Wind Things, 259D), and everything else between. Each entry gives the full address, phone number, web site, opening hours, and a thumbnail sketch of the contents and flavour of the shop.

The Guide is Ewan Halley's brainchild. Coming out of University with a languages background, Ewan taught for several years in Spain, before returning to work in medical and scientific publishing, in Edinburgh. The idea of a guide for specialist shops came to him when he was living abroad, and never really went away. "Not even when I was struggling to edit *The Journal Of Fish Diseases*," said Ewan

wryly. A couple of years ago, when he became a freelance publisher, he used his spare time while building up a client base, to work on producing the Guide.

"I was convinced there was a market," Ewan said. "If people are only in Edinburgh for a few days, time is at a premium. What they need is a book which tells them where all the specialist shops are – and how to find them." And not only foreign tourists: what about ordinary Scots coming through for a day's shopping in Edinburgh, or anyone on a weekend City break?



How do you tackle an anthology like this, bringing order out of constantly changing chaos? "You must start somewhere," Ewan said. "I began with a few sample shops that I knew and liked. Then I broadened out to cover what I could see in the rest of the street. And, when I was going round Edinburgh and noticed

something I wasn't already familiar with, I'd take notes. Over 18 months, it grew into compiling a database."

Next stage was to phone up and check opening hours, then gather details of web sites and product ranges. Here he found himself running not so much into opposition, as suspicion: the thought of a free entry in any Guide was too good to be true. "People kept interrupting, and asking: 'yes, but how much is this going to cost . . .?'," he winced.

In fact, entry was free of charge: he wanted to issue a truly independent Guide.

The high casualty rate in small independents was a major problem, and soon Ewan was spending almost as much time revising, as expanding, his database. Had he identified any common feature among the successful – and surviving – businesses? "They offer a distinctive product, which has real quality," Ewan said instantly. "Something you can't find easily, in other shops. They focus on catering for individualistic people who want something that reflects taste, not fashion."

In a day spent wandering round the city, I followed the Guide to a number of entries, checking out just how distinctive these independents and their products really were.

If you wander along some unprepossessing streets, squeezing past construction workers' temporary huts, you will find a cluster of small

shops in St Mary's Street. One of these is Rene Walrus: ignore the simple frontage and you'll find a treasure chest inside. This small shop holds an exquisite collection of one-off designer jewellery and fashion accessories, described as "an expression of Janet, the owner's taste". Tucked away from the tourist trails, the shop's main customers are locals: "They come here because they know who we are, and what we have."

A major part of the business lies in selling tiaras for weddings – each item individually made, the craftsmanship superb. The shop has been in existence for one and a half years now, doing exactly as Ewan says: offering a distinctive, high-quality range of products, and surviving very nicely, thank you.

Next stop was Eden, in Cockburn Street. Its owner is Ricky Czarnota, who runs six separate independent shops. He has been in this location for 30 years, starting out from a stall in the old Cockburn Street Market. He took over the other market stalls as their owners "moved on", and finally opened Pie In The Sky as the first independent shop in the street. He admits that "running six stores is six times the work", not least in finding the variety of quality goods in keeping with the unique identity of each shop.

Eden deals with contemporary and ethnic decorative items for the home. This year, for the first time, the owners



Images: Ewan Halley

went to Thailand to buy some of their stock – a decision which has proved a huge success. Until now, they have worked with a variety of specialist importers. Thirty years of steady growth suggest that Ricky has got it right, on a regular basis.

My next stop was Cadenheads Whisky Shop, in Canongate. This is the

oldest whisky bottling shop in Scotland, dating back to 1842. While the shop does stock some standard malts, this is not its *raison d'être*: its speciality is that it sells malt whisky as it was always sold, tapped directly from the individual cask. Each cask of malt whisky is unique in taste: it will yield 300 to 350 bottles, depending on

the age and size of the cask. Because taste varies, even quality single malts like Highland Park are the result of blending from as many as 20 casks, to maintain The Standard Taste. For a truly unique taste, try whisky directly from the cask.

Cadenheads own-bottled whisky has a label which shows the name of the distillery, the age, strength of the whisky, the area it comes from, the type of cask and the number of bottles yielded. Sadly, their main customers are not Scots, but overseas tourists: people who know their whisky, and have come to buy something which is truly unique.

Talking of which, Cadenheads hold an extensive range of malts made by distilleries which have closed down. On their stock board in the shop a hand-drawn symbol of a tombstone (with R.I.P.) marks some weel-kent names, now fond memories: names like Dallas Dhu (24-year-old), Lochside (24-year-old), Glenlochie (19-year-old), and Banff (27-year-old). Did you know that Banff, apart from private supplies to the House of Commons, has never been commercially bottled? Here is a chance to buy something distinctive.

But their star performer has nothing to do with whisky. She is Maggie, an eight-month-old Greyfriars Bobby lookalike, who wanders freely from the shop floor to her space in the window, where she watches passing traffic.

Three unique and

independent retail outlets, all knowing exactly what they are doing, and keeping away from the direct competition of the larger stores. My final visit was to another of that ilk.

Why use a name like Halibut and Herring for such a sensitive and beautifully arranged display of body products, toiletries, bathroom accessories and gifts? "It's an intriguing name, designed to catch attention," said Wendy Beaumont, its owner. She runs two branches, and the brand has been in existence for 10 years.



Mark Neilson

*Maggie adds to the window display of Cadenheads Whisky Shop.*

The main impact, on entry, is the way the displays attract the eye. Wendy was an interior designer and a successful watercolour artist for 28 years before moving on to this new challenge. It shows.

"Sourcing the various items takes forever," she said. "They must be good quality, original. Then there is the time-consuming job of getting the display just right."


Here is another owner

who doesn't even attempt to second guess where the market is heading. She backs her own taste: "I put what I like in front of customers – and if they like it too, that's lovely. Most of the time I get it right. A big part of my business is follow-up or repeat sales."

She sees her niche as "providing quality service and distinctive products", and feels that she has nothing to fear from the larger stores. She trusts her own judgement, and treats external threats as the spark which keeps her interest alive. "You can't ever get complacent," she says. "That's so dangerous."

These small independent shops in Edinburgh are full of character – and characters. So refreshing, in a culture where every High Street looks the same. Using the Guide to plan an expedition through darkest Edinburgh – no two trips should be the same.

Remember the Christmas Shop? Sir Cliff Richard dropped in one day last year, killing time before a concert. He looked round, then asked advice on which decorations and motifs might go with the planned gold theme for his Christmas tree. "He bought six of everything," said May Morrison.

But he wouldn't have done that in a chainstore . . . 

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[www.mottopublishing.com](http://www.mottopublishing.com) or  
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