



PROFESSIONAL JEWELLER CITYSCAPES: CANTERBURY

If you're a jeweller in Canterbury then you are most definitely not afraid of competition. Despite a population of around 151,000 people and a commercial centre you can comfortably walk in one afternoon, there are no fewer than 20 jewellery businesses all vying for their share of the pie in the heart of this historic cathedral city.

With the picturesque River Stour flowing through the city and meandering cobbled streets winding gently past towering Medieval architecture, there are certainly less attractive places to be retailing jewellery. Despite its small radius, housed inside ancient Roman walls, the retail scene in Canterbury is positively

bustling. This university city houses around 40,000 students, as well as welcoming tourists from all over the world to visit its Cathedral, Canterbury Tales Museum, and various heritage sites and points of interest.

One of the most notable aspects of the city is its numerous jewellers: dotted across Canterbury are a plethora of independent and high street retailers with an exhaustive spectrum of offerings. In fact, it is possible (with the help of Google maps), to take a thorough tour of the city centre covering most streets, by using each jeweller as pinpoints on a map.

Much like the city, the jewellers themselves are an eclectic mixture of old and

WELCOME TO THE FIRST PROFESSIONAL JEWELLER CITYSCAPES. A NEW SERIES WHERE WE WILL BE VISITING TOWNS AND CITIES AROUND THE UK TO BUILD UP A COMPREHENSIVE PICTURE OF THE LOCAL JEWELLERY TRADE AND TAKE YOU INSIDE THE STORES OF THE LEADING RETAILERS FOR THE FULL LOWDOWN ON THE TRENDS AND ISSUES SHAPING THEIR BUSINESS. TO KICK THINGS OFF, PJ EDITOR NAIDA REDGRAVE HEADED TO **CANTERBURY** WHERE, OVER THE COURSE OF TWO DAYS, SHE DISCOVERED ONE OF THE MOST VIBRANT BUT COMPETITIVE JEWELLERY MARKETS IN THE UK.

new, with the mainstream retailers such as Swarovski, H. Samuel, Beaverbrooks and Ernest Jones housed in the area around the Whitefriars shopping quarter, a hub of all the usual chain stores you'd expect to see in East Kent's largest shopping centre.

Venturing away towards the high street, independents start to spring up, and narrow lanes lead to a network of jewellers in all directions. Observing across a Monday and Tuesday, footfall appeared steady despite the temperamental

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CANTERBURY FACT SHEET

COUNTY: **KENT**
 POPULATION: **151,000**
 WORKFORCE SIZE: **75,000**
 UNEMPLOYMENT RATE: **1%**
 MEDIAN FULL-TIME EARNINGS
 (WEEKLY): **£466**
 ACTIVE BUSINESSES: **5,400**
 OUTPUT (GROSS VALUE
 ADDED): **£3.18BN**
 AV. HOUSE PRICE: **£251, 475**
 CITY FACT: **ITS ICONIC CATHEDRAL
 WAS FOUNDED IN 597 A.D.**

SOURCE: KENT.GOV.UK



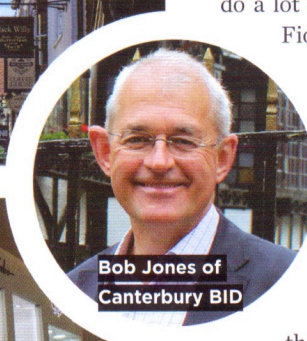
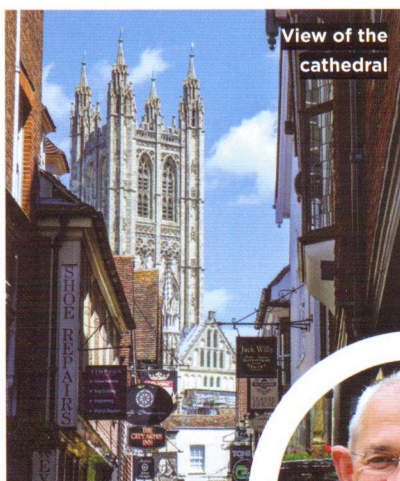
weather, with a notable number of visitors in each of the larger retailers. Although the independents were quieter, all reported healthy sales performances, with many experiencing year-on-year growth. With so many jewellers competing in such a small space, what is the secret to Canterbury's success?

THE RETAIL ORGANISATION

To shed some light on retail in the city, chief executive of Canterbury BID, Bob Jones, builds up a picture, explaining how its history and charm continues to lure in shoppers from around the country.

"Canterbury is a beautiful, heritage-based city, which has kept pace with the modern day. You can walk down streets almost unchanged for 30 or 40 centuries, and you can be in London in 55 minutes. From here, you can be in Paris in two and a half hours, and we welcome seven million visitors a year.

"From the Iron Age, through to the Romans and into the Saxons, jewellery has always been an important part of Canterbury's history. St Dunstan, who is the patron Saint of gold and silversmiths, was a Saxon archbishop and was buried in St Augustin's Church here.



"Retail-wise, we have all of the change you'd expect. However, we have independent jewellers who are particularly strong and do very well. As an organisation, our job is to wake up everyday, and try as hard as we can to make Canterbury a great place to be. With around 650 businesses in the area, we aim to transform how the city centre works, the influence business will have on the environment in which they trade, and the experience everyone has in the city."

RUNNING IN THE FAMILY

Charlotte Elizabeth Stilwell, proprietor of Stilwell Jewellers, is the third generation of this established family business.

Fifty years on, Stilwells is still going strong. "I think there's more footfall in Canterbury now," she says. "I think people are also investing in jewellery, so that's made quite a bit of difference. It seems to be steady and that's the main thing."

So how does a business manage to remain current, when being passed down through generations?

"This business has now been here fifty years. It started off with my grandfather owning it; he started engraving just after the war to earn a bit of extra money. He

bought this property and it was just an engravers for many years, then my father took over and started bringing in the jewellery, and then two years ago I took over. "Fashion changes, and you've just got to keep up with fashion."

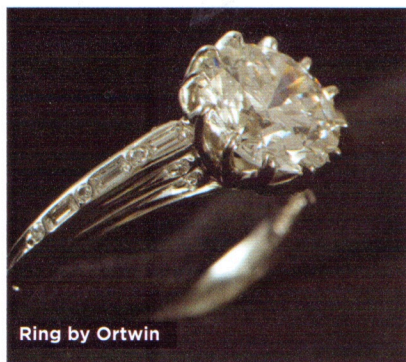
"We stock all of the traditional items; the gold jewellery, the gem sets, engagement rings, eternity rings, wedding bands, that type of thing. We also do a lot of silver jewellery, as well as

Fiorelli costume jewellery. We do the Ortak range from the Orkney Islands, which is enamelled jewellery, so you pick the shape of the silver and then you pick the colour yourself. Our amber range is very popular, I think because it suits everyone of all age groups. I

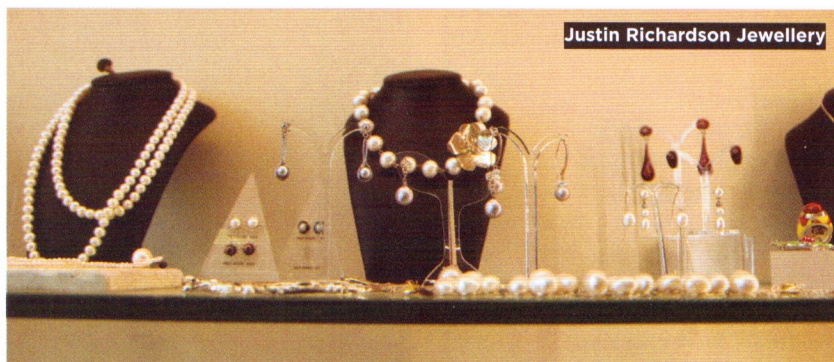
think people just find it interesting because it's millions of years old yet a decent price, and every piece looks different. Nothing is the bestseller though, really. You just sell a range. Someone might come in for a diamond ring but in addition might leave with a piece of amber or a piece of silver as well. You can't stick to one thing, like jewellers know, you've got to have a bit of everything to keep everyone happy."

As well as moving with the times, Charlotte still retains her grandfather's foundations of the business. "We do hand-engraving on site, which my father has been doing for forty-odd years. We also offer machine engraving, watch repairs, clock repairs, jewellery repairs, pearl restringing – quite a lot really!"

When it comes to being a retailer in Canterbury, Charlotte does feel fortunate. "Football is always good in Canterbury, because we've got the Cathedral down the road. Obviously it's a highly populated student city as well, and students like to spend their money on jewellery. We've got our regulars who've been coming here for fifty years, and their families still come here. You have your dips like any business. You have quiet moments, for example when an election's on. There are always going to be the ups and downs. I think if you've got a good reputation, and people rely on you and trust you, then you're okay. Obviously, if you've got somebody's jewellery, you have to be very trustworthy."



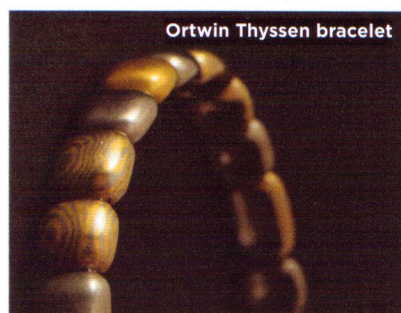
Ring by Ortwin



Justin Richardson Jewellery



Stilwells Jewellers



Ortwin Thyssen bracelet

WHAT WE ALL DO IS VERY DIFFERENT STYLISTICALLY; SO WE'VE CREATED A JEWELLERY QUARTER, ALMOST. THERE ARE SIGNIFICANT AMOUNTS OF US, BUT WE DON'T NECESSARILY STEAL WORK FROM EACH OTHER, WE COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER."

And what does Charlotte think about having so many other jewellers in close proximity? "There's always competition; there's always the main high street stores which sell their known brands, but people also like to buy from an independent, family-run company. We sell very different things and we all support each other. If we can't get something in, or can't do something, we'll always recommend someone else. A lot of people come in and say they've been recommended by another store. I don't think there's much rivalry. If you can help others out, they'll help you out."

BRIDGING TRADITION AND FASHION

Trevor Fitzgerald has been a jeweller since the seventies. Currently owner of Fitzgerald Jewellers of Canterbury and Iconic by Fitzgerald, he and his staff discuss how having more than one store facilitates his business. "I've been in the jewellery trade since 1979, but we've had

this shop, Fitzgerald the Jeweller, since 2002," explains Trevor.

"We've got other stores, including Iconic, which opened six months ago. We were a normal mainstream jewellers for years and years, then Pandora came along and it changed everything. It took the focus off the other jewellery because you were busy selling bits of Pandora. When that moved and we'd been used to selling in that way, we took on other brands like Thomas Sabo and that did very well, so we realised it would be a good idea to split the business.

We opened Iconic on the high street, and then refocussed Fitzgerald's back to being a jewellers doing traditional things. We've got a valuer, and a workshop that we've just opened, and we're selling less branded products.

Branch manager Hugh Potter adds: "Traditional can sound old

fashioned, which we're not. We're very forward thinking in the way that we're going. The workshop is doing fantastic bespoke design work, and it's very modern. By opening Iconic, Fitzgerald's is able to focus on getting back to what we were doing beforehand."

The high street positioning of the Iconic store puts it in a prime position for customers. "Footfall is incredible. The fact that the populous of Canterbury is so mixed, with the students, and the tourism it attracts, plus the people that have lived here for years, it's great for business," says Hugh. "And looking around, it's just so historic, it's a really nice place to be. I lived in London for a while, and coming back, the pace of life is really enjoyable."

Store supervisor at Iconic, Rosie Williams, worked with Trevor for four years before moving over to the new store. "We do well all year round, especially in the summer because of the universities, and the various language schools for students who come to learn English. The cathedral is a huge draw for people as well,

so footfall is consistent all the time, but then in the summer it goes through the roof.

"In terms of the division of brands, we have Marco Bicego, and we have



Ortwin Thyssen ring

Dave Baxter & Allie Archer, Hadfields Jewellers & Designers

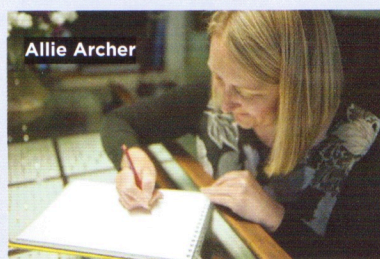
Established in 1978, Hadfields Jewellers sits nestled to the east of the city, slightly off the beaten track. Owners Dave Baxter and Allie Archer have been running the business for the past three years.

Professional Jeweller: Was it daunting to take over a store that was so well established?

Dave Baxter: There was a degree of worry taking over, but it was reassuring that we had a solid business with a great customer base. Having been family-run, our work ethics are the same so it still has that feel. A lot of clients think that we are a family. We have a good team behind us, we get on well together so it creates an efficient, smooth running machine. There is a happy atmosphere, we think, and we get regular good comments about our friendly customer service and attention to detail.

PJ: What is the key to keeping a traditional business with such a rich history relevant in modern times?

Allie Archer: We keep old traditions alive by being predominantly bespoke. Our jewellery is of a very high standard; we are renowned for our use of good quality materials and stones.



PJ: How long has Hadfields had an online presence and in what ways does it help with business?

D: We've updated it this year to keep up with the times. As yet we don't feel the need to sell from it as we are a more bespoke setup, but it serves as a door to the outside world and gives people a taste of what we do.

PJ: Hadfields has been around for 40 years. What is the key to a business that lasts generations?

D: Giving great customer service and making people feel at home and relaxed!

a quirky brand, Bjorg in Fitzgeralds. We were going to take it over to Iconic but it carries on doing quite well here. In terms of sales performance, the bespoke workshop pieces have really taken off since we put that in just before Christmas. Marco Bicego has also been good.

"The other great market for us is having our own valuer on site buying in pre-owned pieces. The Iconic store specialises in fashion jewellery, with brands such as Swarovski

and Thomas Sabo proving popular," comments Trevor.

For him, it is all about carving out a speciality. "There are a lot of jewellers in Canterbury, but we've all got our niches: we were always the ones that took the brands on. As that has now moved to Iconic, there are quite a number of jewellers doing handmade pieces, but there seems to be enough business for all of us at the moment, and we tend to get on well with all of the other jewellers."

THE AWARD WINNER

Justin Richardson, designer, maker and owner of Justin Richardson Designer Jewellery, has 20 years of experience under his belt, which has seen him awarded numerous design prizes for his creations.

"I've been here nearly a decade. We've always had a workshop on site. We have a screen so people can see the fact that we make things bespoke. And I wanted people to be able to see us making things, and to immediately understand that we are something a little bit different than a high street jeweller."

Setting up initially, Justin had expected to be more of a retail outlet with the occasional commission and repairs, however, he has found that demand has dictated his business. "As time has gone on the bespoke nature of what we do is much more prevalent. People come to us because they want something special and something unique. Part of the enjoyment of it is meeting the customer, designing the piece, making the piece and handing it over. You get the full circle with everything, and we're all in the position to do that."

Justin's skills have seen him recognised by the Freeman of The Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths'. "I've entered some pieces over the years, and have won some top awards. It's really a chance to show off in front of your peers, and to have your work picked apart and studied in detail – so you have to be suitably confident that it is good enough for that! We're very fortunate to have had pieces that have been recognised."

On display in the window is a silver wine jug, which won a gold award last year. "I was trained initially as a silversmith," says Justin, "but I've since diversified into jewellery as you can't make a living as a silversmith. It's very labour intensive, and the time involved and the material cost is very high."

In the store, Justin has a stock collection of handmade silver items, with price points between £250 and £750. "They're relatively expensive for silver jewellery but they're all unique and made one at a time," he says. "We also cater for the general wedding and engagement ring market, which is the core business really."

Justin and his team create a series of handpainted designs for customers, working closely together during the pro-

The fine jewellery maker

Ortwin Thyssen, jewellery maker and owner of Ortwin Thyssen Master Jewellery, has been on the scene in Canterbury for 16 years, opening his own store a decade ago.

"We only sell our own jewellery; making jewellery by hand and sticking to some of the old fashioned ways gives the jewellery a great character. We don't have just one speciality, we offer a very broad range of products. One unusual thing we do is the Japanese Mokume-gane technique, where we laminate metals together so we get patterns in the jewellery. We do quite a few wedding rings using that, but we also do a lot of other types of jewellery incorporating bits of it.



In terms of issues, finding trained people is a problem for us; it's difficult to find people with diverse enough skills. Another issue is Fairtrade gold, which we've carried since we started. It's difficult to promote and to source as well. The Fairtrade Foundation seems better suited to bigger businesses. I don't blame them, but it's not helping me. I would like to do more, but right now I don't feel I have the power and sources to promote it enough. In the next few years we'll look into that more.

Also 'conflict-free' is a term that customers recognise, understand and expect, but for me the phrase is really the minimum baseline. If we do not ensure it's adhered to in the industry, the responsibility will fall on our feet. One day it is going to get us, if we ignore it. So all of us have to be aware of it as an issue.

Canterbury is a good place to be a jeweller. Everybody has their own little niche and we have quite a good radius of customers in the city. The rents are expensive, but not as much as London. We have a bit less pressure on us, so we can be a bit more experimental in what we're doing."

cess. "That way the client knows exactly what they're getting because they've been involved, so they don't come to collect something they weren't expecting," he says. "We also use CAD design. We use all types of technology and techniques, but fundamentally they'll be finished with goldsmithing skills."

Standard pieces can take up to four weeks to make from start to finish. "It's longer to wait than some online stores, but with sight unseen jewellery the craftsmanship is usually terrible. Most people want to invest a bit more personality, and a bit more individuality. If they want something off the peg, then I'm probably not for them. You're never going to appeal to everyone."

Across the visit, each business visited consistently reported healthy, steady sales. "We've progressed year on year, and even expanded our team," he says.

So just what is Canterbury's secret? .

"There are significant amounts of us, but we complement each other. The fact that there are lots of jewellers is actually more beneficial than not," he points out.

When it comes to Canterbury, it appears that safety in numbers, coupled with a clear USP, is the key to its success. This vibrant city has a lot going for it and, thanks to the falling unemployment rate and population growth, jewellers are reaping the benefit of the rise in disposable income.

"What we all do is very different stylistically and we've almost created a jewellery quarter," he says.

Shifting the focus away from London and Birmingham has afforded the opportunity to appreciate the jewellery trade experience from a sometimes overlooked pocket of the country, and if Canterbury is anything to go by, there are many more stories of success to be explored. ♦

Canterbury jeweller directory

Anthony W Pearce Jewellers.

56 St Peter's St, Canterbury CT1 2BE, 01227 463307

A Simmonds Jewellers

27 St Margaret's St, Canterbury CT1 2TG, 01227 769842.

Aztec Silver Designs 6 Butchery

Ln, Canterbury CT1 2JR, 01227 452825

Beaverbrooks the Jewellers

George's Whitefriars Shopping Centre, 24 St George's St, Canterbury CT1 2SS, 01227 456264.

Cousins Jewellers

8 Sun St, Canterbury CT1 2HX, 01227 765882

Ernest Jones, Whitefriars Street

14 Whitefriars Street, Canterbury, Kent CT1 2TB, 01227 472365

Hadfields Jewellers

67 Castle St, Canterbury CT1 2PY, 01227 454870

Fitzgerald Jewellers

26 Burgate, Canterbury CT1 2HA, 01227 767206

Justin Richardson Designer Jewellery

23 Sun St, Canterbury CT1 2HX, 01227 471693

Iconic by Fitzgerald

13 Parade, Canterbury CT1 2SG, 01227 457665

Luke Goldsmith Jewellers

6A St Peter's St, Canterbury, Kent CT1 2AT, 01227 765340.

Ortwin Thyssen Jewellery Maker

53 Palace St, Canterbury CT1 2DY, 01227 788200

Palace Street Jewellers

16 Palace St, Canterbury CT1 2DZ, 01227 463224

Stilwells Jewellers

13 Burgate, Canterbury CT1 2HG, 01227 464417

Swarovski

21 Marlowe Arcade, Canterbury, KE CT1 2TJ, 01227 787557.

Warren James Jewellers

8 St George's St, Canterbury CT1 2SR, 01227 478557