

A monument to golf

Specialist sports retailer American Golf has opened a flagship store in the City that will provide a template for future launches. John Ryan visits

There are 400,000 fewer golfers in the UK than there were three years ago, according to a National Golf Foundation survey cited by Daniel Gathercole, head of marketing at specialist sports retailer American Golf.

He says that in large measure this can be ascribed to potential golfers decamping to cycling and that to date two-wheeled sporting wannabes have been much more heavily marketed to, thanks to close tie-ups with media outfits such as Sky.

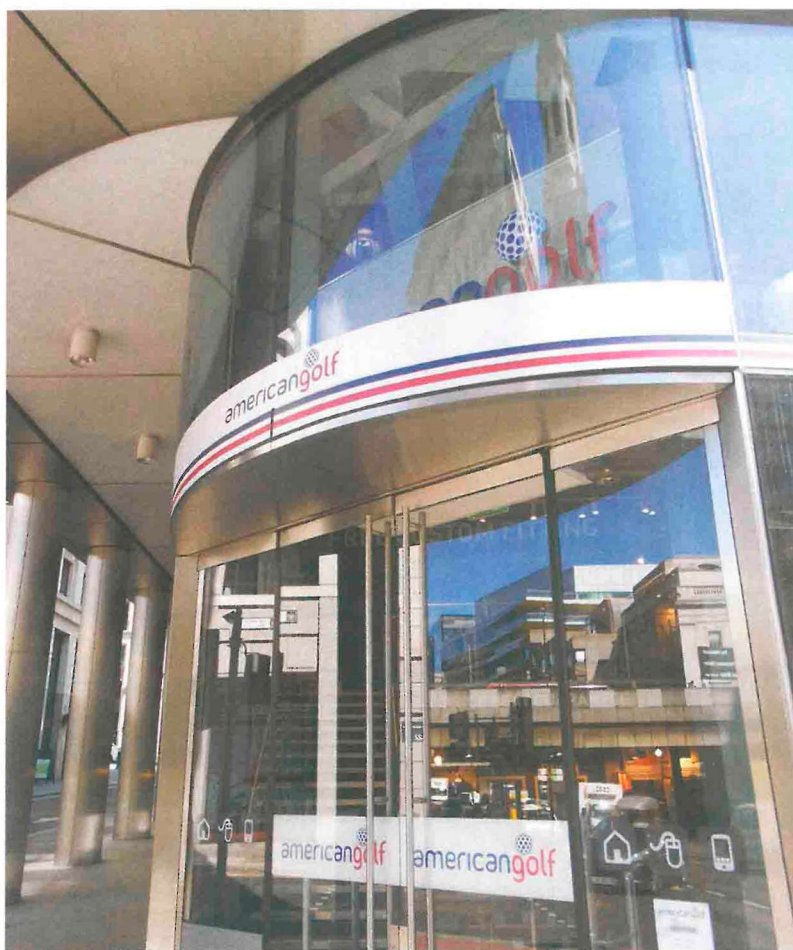
This must be bad news for American Golf, which has 103 UK stores. It has closed one of these so far this year, in Birmingham, but the plan for 2014 is for five branches to be added to the tally. And one of these is just around the corner from The Monument, in the City of London. Gathercole comments that it is the only dedicated golf shop in the area and that "if you want professional advice, it's the only place to go".

That said, the two-floor, 2,000 sq ft store is swimming against the sporting tide it would seem. Even Gathercole admits that it's a "tough time" for those looking to sell a set of Callaway or Titleist clubs, when set against the latest sleek-looking carbon fibre bike of whatever brand.

Above par exterior

The store, which is on the corner of the oddly named Fish Street Hill and Lower Thames Street, shows that American Golf is a trader that puts its money where its four iron is.

The curved entrance that wraps around the corner of the building is a hi-tech looking mix of glass and matte steel and has something more of the bank about it than a retail unit. Any such misgivings are dispelled by the red, white and blue stripes that form part of the American Golf logo and an additional large logo also lurks inside

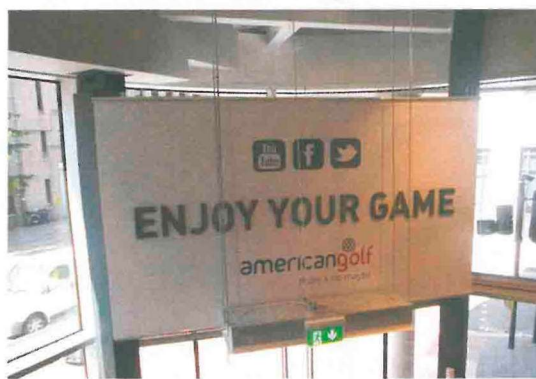


the glass at first floor level, forcing the eye to inspect the whole of the frontage.

Inside, this is a store of two parts. Downstairs are clothing and accessories, while the clubs and putters that might most readily be associated with the sport are all housed on the first floor.

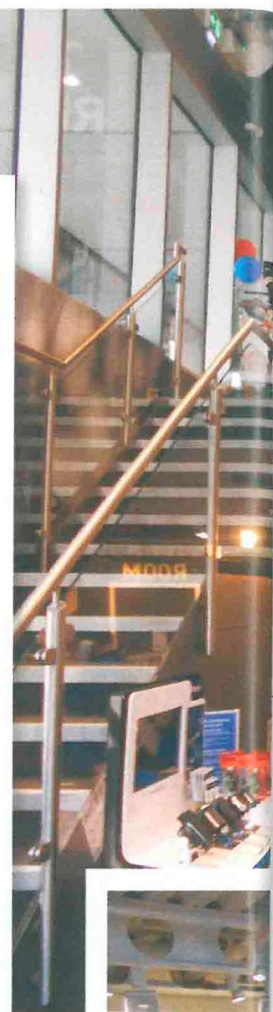
Gathercole says American Golf's online operation is also housed in this building, above the shop, and that for the 22 people working in that part of the business this matters as "it brings them close to the product and closer to the stores".

For the terrestrial shopper however, the initial vista is of a fairly large ground floor with a staircase to the left and a balustrade that bears the graphic: "We exist to improve your game" picked out in large white letters. Next to this, another graphic reads: "Price Beat Guarantee". This matters. There are a lot of sports retailers – albeit not golf specialists – in the City and most of them have some form of golf presence,



AMERICAN GOLF, THE MONUMENT, LONDON

Opened July 2014
Size 2,000 sq ft
Number of floors 2
Number of UK American Golf stores 103







much of which is price-based.

Gathercole says that the shop at The Monument is one of seven new stores. This one has been open for just over a month and is a new concept for the retailer.

Practically, that means visitors to the store can indeed buy the usual slick (and usually expensive) jumpers that get you noticed on the fairway.

At the action end of things there is a computerised driving range upstairs where players of the sport can find out which clubs are right for them.

And while the ground floor is certainly functional and adequately merchandised, with everything from gold tees to motorised golf bag trolleys, it is the first floor where the real fun is.

The driving range on this floor is staffed by one of the store's golf pros, ready to operate the several computerised kiosks and a big screen while potential shoppers test-drive their skills with various golf clubs.

Gathercole notes that at lunchtime in the City there are some office workers who head for the two-bay range in the shop as a form of entertainment, and have little intention of actually buying

anything. "It's very frustrating. We don't want to be rude, but there are probably a couple of people who want to buy something and we have to try and make it clear that we are a shop, not a lunchtime diversion," he adds.

Join the clubs

Beyond the driving range, it's golf clubs all the way on this level, organised by brand, gender and age – there are separate areas for women and children. There is nothing particularly radical about the way in which everything is displayed, but the offer is certainly more substantial than elsewhere in this part of London.

And for those who do choose to buy something there is a next-day delivery service (to the office in many cases), on payment of £4.95. The service is free if the shopper is prepared to accept a two to five-day delivery window.

There is of course a wider range online than it is possible to find in the shop and Gathercole points out that if a particular size, colour or style is not in stock then customers can order using one of the in-store iPads. "We've got them in all of our stores now," he says.

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American Golf

The real question has to be whether, given the decline in the number of people playing the game, this store is a wasted effort and whether American Golf could do worse than morphing into American Bikes?

Gathercole says that all is not lost and that providing some of the industry bodies can work with media and retailing to boost the profile of the game – in the way that, say, cyclewear brand Rapha has done with Sky – things are not irretrievable.

He also notes that "the Ryder Cup will help in September – it's the third-biggest sporting event in the world and we're hoping for a European win".

Whether you choose to believe this fact or not, there can be little doubt that the occasion will help raise sales. American Golf is hoping to capture younger players by launching a Junior Club Cup, which takes place at Mottram Hall in Cheshire at the end of this month.

Everything to play 18 holes for then, and with a monochrome graphic of Tiger Woods surveying the store from a vantage point halfway up the stairs, things may be on the up for this retailer following a loss in the last financial year.