

STORES

Often wrongly dismissed as being 'for tourists', Covent Garden is home to some striking store design. **John Ryan** visits the London shopping destination

The other

Speak to most long-in-the-tooth Londoners and they'll probably say Covent Garden is a place they don't often visit. This is, after all, a destination filled with tourists who have almost no association with the capital. Maybe so, but that is to confine Covent Garden to that area known as the Piazza, a short stroll down James Street from the Tube station.

Covent Garden is, of course, much bigger than that, incorporating Long Acre, the thoroughfare where most of the big chains are found, and Seven Dials – seven streets that a mix of independents and boutique-style brands call home. What is interesting is just how much there is that is not found in many other places in the UK and the extent to which idiosyncratic visual merchandising prevails.

There are many reasons for taking a walk around the area and in doing so it is likely that new ideas will be found, even in the post-Christmas period when the Sales are still very evident. It is also worth noting how many of Covent Garden's shops are lone outposts of concerns that have their origins overseas.

Sabon

The idea of a pharmacy-meets-traditional confectioner that sells soaps and soothing unguents for bath time is not new. But for one of the best examples around at the moment, look no further than Sabon.

The Israel-based retailer set up shop in the area at the end of last year and from the outside, this store looks a little like a posh drawing room, complete with sparkly chandeliers.

Venture inside and it's a matter of dark wood perimeter shelves, reclaimed oak plank floors and a font-like structure in the mid-shop. The latter looks like the kind of thing that might



Sabon



Franklin & Marshall



have been raided from a now-redundant place of worship and adds to the sense that the shopper has entered a place of renewal.

There is the usual whitewashed brick on the back wall, close to the cash desk, and in many ways the interior is the sum of all that you'd expect of this sort of retailing. It is well done however, and stands as an object lesson in how to trade and

succeed in what is an almost entirely discretionary category.

Franklin & Marshall

For many, Franklin and Marshall is a US college in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. For some, however, it is a clothing brand headquartered in Verona, Italy, which takes its inspiration from the educational institution of the same name.

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Covent Garden



B 1866

This flagship store has been open since the middle of last year. And in spite of the Italian provenance of the clothing, the interior is an immodest homage to Americana, from the US college-style logo on the outside to the Stars and Stripes flag just inside the entrance.

Once more, there are plenty of contenders for the centre ground of this particular part of retail, with American Eagle, Hollister and to an extent Gap all vying for top honours.

But from the college football pennants on the walls to the helmets for

those involved in the sport, this one leads the way as far as creating a US sporting image is concerned.

College clothing demands a particular setting if it is to work and the Franklin & Marshall store in Covent Garden shows what is possible.

B 1866

Those in search of cycling clothing and accessories might find themselves in B 1866. This is the sole standalone outpost of bicycle saddle brand Brooks, which has decided that Covent Garden's Earlham Street is

Main retail streets

Floral Street, Earlham Street, Mercer Street, Neale Street among others

Ambience

'Hidden London'

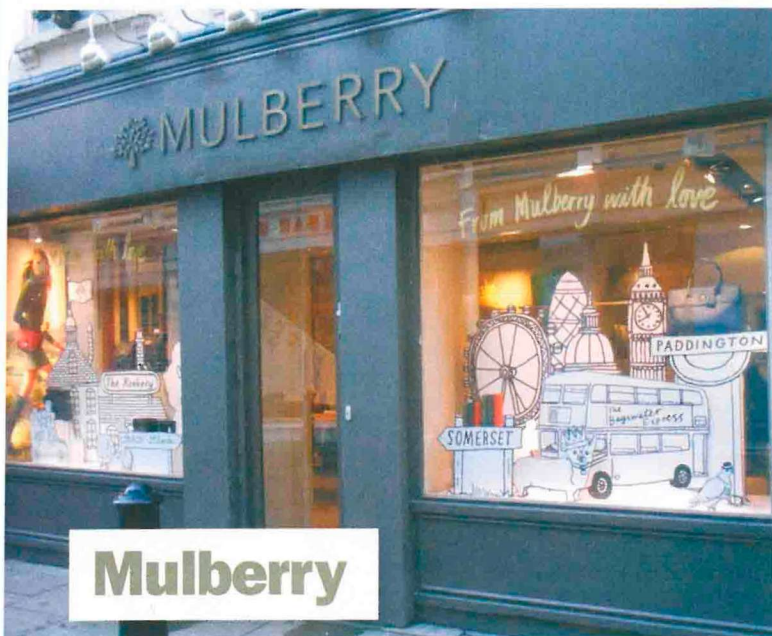
Mix Retailers that want to appear to be indies and actual indies. Many overseas retailers choose the area for their flagships.

Most interesting new retailer

Finisterre

STORES

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the appropriate venue for its offer. Bicycles used as props are fairly standard fare at the moment and in many instances they serve little real purpose other than to look pretty.

In B 1866, however, they are the markers that tell the observer that this really is a bike accessory shop, even though it may appear to be rather more of a men's lifestyle emporium.

The clue is reinforced by a wall of leather saddles of the kind that will probably leave the uninitiated saddle-sore and which is backed by whitewashed brick, providing a neutral, warehouse-style backdrop for the merchandise.

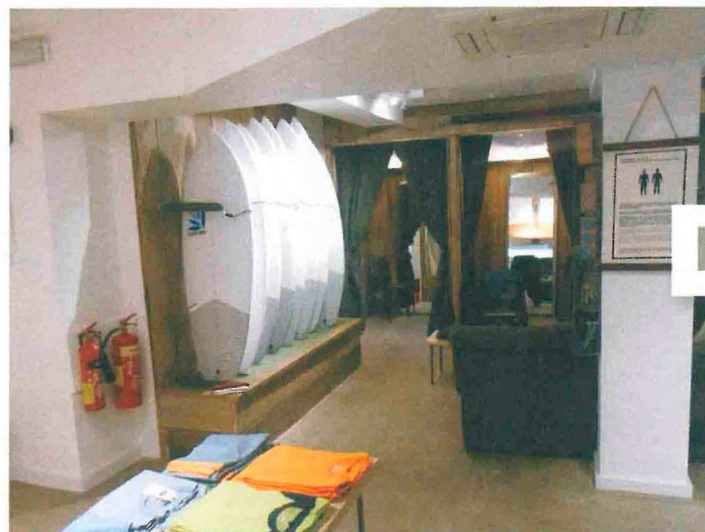
On the other side of the shop, the brick wall has been painted matte grey and is where brightly coloured backpacks in canvas and leather are on show. Between the two walls, the low mid-shop tables are used for the bikes, helmets and small leather goods.

All of which has more of the fashion interior about it than a down-and-dirty store for enthusiasts of two wheels.

Finisterre

Opened at the end of 2014, this shop from Cornish brand Finisterre, which sells outdoor, surf-related merchandise and big chunky socks that fishermen might wear, is a mild curiosity.

Finisterre opened a pop-up store in London in 2013 and presumably on the strength of that has taken the plunge and occupied



'Storytelling' was a much-talked about way of attracting shoppers in 2014, but there were few retailers that did it to any great effect

a two-floor unit on Earlham Street, which it has dubbed its flagship.

Roughly speaking this translates as more wooden floorboards, clothing and a cafe. The latter doubles up as the cash desk, but the stars of this particular show are the surfboards.

London is, at best, a couple of hours from the nearest beach that might have surfable waves and putting surfboards in a shop is therefore something that should be seen as mood-setting rather than anything that amounts to a serious

commercial proposition. That said, the staff, who look as if they might have stepped straight out of a Cornish *Baywatch*, make you feel as if it might be worthwhile buying a wetsuit or two.

Framed coastal pictures, bright white walls, storm lights and untreated wooden fixtures add to the surf-shack feel and, if nothing else, the coffee is pretty good.

Outdoor retailers and brands abound in Covent Garden, but Finisterre is a welcome addition.

Finisterre

Mulberry

Tucked away from the hurly-burly of Covent Garden's main streets, Mulberry's window display is a demonstration of how simplicity can be interesting, low-cost and relevant to a location.

There are very few of the bags for which the retailer and brand is famous in the store's two windows but the black line drawings indicating where Mulberry's products are manufactured demand attention.

'Storytelling' was a much-talked about way of attracting shoppers in 2014, but there were relatively few retailers that managed to do it to any great effect.

This store is one of the better examples of the trend and shows how powerful good storytelling can be.

Floral Street is off-pitch if you happen to be a big retailer (although Ted Baker is also on this thoroughfare). But with Paul Smith, Y-3 and Nigel Hall as neighbours, Mulberry's choice of location and manner of ensuring that it gets eyeballed are noteworthy.