



THE NEW ALFRED DUNHILL SHOP

By Tim Rich

When something steeped in tradition and character is changed, one fears the worst. When I heard that the Alfred Dunhill Shop in London had undergone a dramatic redesign, and that the popular tobacco

desk had been moved 'upstairs', I hoped that the firm had embraced modernity without throwing away history.

I travelled to London's swish Jermyn Street to see the results of the change for myself.

JERMYN STREET, LONDON SW1

THROUGH THE DOORS

On entering the shop, one is immediately drawn to an elegant staircase ascending to the warmly atmospheric tobacco area above. The metal banisters are Art Deco-esque, and climbing the steps feels rather like boarding a grand ocean liner. Stepping on board, you are met by a splendid vision of deep mahogany walls, leather furniture and subtly lit display cases. Wandering around the displays, you'll find both new products and beautifully crafted classics, like an H grain Lumberjack (worth, for the financially minded, around £4,500). Light, 1930s jazz hovers in the background, and as you move around the room you find portraits of Alfred Dunhill gazing on proceedings, and books about the Dunhill empire laid open for inspection.

It is clear that the modern-day Dunhill operation has worked hard to recreate the atmosphere of the shop in its 1930s heyday, particularly in the tobacco desk area. However, the result isn't a hollow, antiques simulation; old and new are brought together most effectively. In the far corner, for example, you'll find two wonderfully battered, low-slung leather armchairs sitting in front of a TV, a financial stock price screen and a stereo. Marc Burrows, the tall, urbane figure who runs the tobacco desk, arrives to explain the changes they have made and to talk about aspects of the history of the shop. He picks up on my reference to the 1930s feel, and explains that Dunhill has deliberately sought to create the atmosphere of a club. 'Lots of people use it like a club - no-one knows they are here, they can relax and unwind, and it is rather like an inner sanctum. Clients like to be pampered, so we're doing lots of things they used to do here in the '30s. There's freshly

made coffee and tea, champagne truffles, mints, whisky'. Right on cue some fresh coffee and devilishly tempting truffles arrive - I begin to understand the attractions of this refuge from the hurly-burly of everyday life. But Burrows is keen for the area to be as inviting for someone who just wants to pop in for a new supply of tobacco once in a blue moon as for someone who regularly spends time there. Indeed, he knows that the tobacco desk (and indeed all pipe retailers) must encourage visits from uninitiated customers who are not necessarily experts in all things to do with smoking, and he appears to recognise that Dunhill's premium image can sometimes make it appear rather aloof and forbidding. 'We don't want people to be afraid to come in here,' he says. 'A gentleman came in recently and I asked

him if he had been in before; he said 'no, I've always been too afraid to come in'. This is something we have to get over.'

Despite this, new customers are coming through the door and up the stairs. 'I really do see many more of the younger pipesmokers coming in now,' says Burrows. 'I had two young Americans

in yesterday - one was bringing in a friend to buy a pipe and sample lots of these hand blended to-

baccos. We want people to know that this is a very comfortable atmosphere, and a very clubby environment. Once people do venture in they're hooked.' He points out that there is much to tempt customers in the store beyond their main purchase. For pipe customers, there is always the added allure of the Humidor room, with its racks of wonderful Cuban and Dominican Republic cigars. But there's much more than just smoking products: 'People who smoke cigars and pipes also wear clothes, but they prefer you to follow the sale through,' says Burrows. This is >



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where another aspect of the shop's tradition gives it a valuable difference today. Where staff in most shops will hand you over to whoever looks after each section - be it ties, shoes, jewellery, tobacco, or whatever - in the Alfred Dunhill shop each member of staff must be sufficiently knowledgeable about everything on sale to help a customer with whatever they need. 'Generally, take people away from, say, leather goods and they're lost. Here you have to know everything - the microns of gold, how the watches are put together, what type of leather is used, things like that.' So, you may go into the Dunhill Shop to get your lighter mended, but if you want to look at the shop's other delights - including the excellent new golf area - you'll be well looked after.

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The new museum

This all-round knowledge and expertise reflects the development of the shop itself. Although many people think Dunhill started with smoking products, it actually began with motoring goods. It was only with Alfred Dunhill's development of the now famous windshield pipe,

business began and how it has since grown and progressed. Previously only open for pre-arranged guided tours, the archive is now open all day, and visitors are free to

enter whenever they like. The museum is in a large, wonderfully cool circular room. A tobacco store Indian presides over the space from the middle of the room, and display cases run around the outside.

While only a small selection from the thousands of items in the archive is exhibited at any one time, the displays change often, inviting you to visit regularly. Despite its flexibility, the exhibition follows a broadly chronological pattern, starting, of course, with the motoring artefacts. Goggles, leather helmets, car horns - every imaginable piece of early motoring paraphernalia is here. Look out for the 'Bobby Finders', a police detection system for speeding motorists, incorporating what looks like binoculars, from around 1903. The objects then diversify into other leisure activities, including fishing, until one encounters the windshield pipe. From the mid-1920s, more smoking objects appear, including a prototype Dunhill lighter from about 1922, set on a Colmans mustard tin, and a pipe

with a built-in tobacco cutter from 1940 (the property of King George VI!). Then there is a selection of stunning lacquered and enamelled lighters, with many revealing the influence of Japanese and Art Deco imagery.

There are many patented products amongst the collection, including some imaginative solutions to smokers' everyday problems. You may, for example, find a lighter with a concealed key from 1936 (an excellent idea if you lose your keys easily, not so good if you tend to leave

your lighter behind in the pub); a hip flask disguised as a book called 'Just a spot', from 1939, for those illicit drinking sessions; and, for the purposes of conversation-prompting rather than functional reasons, I would guess, a pipe rack in the guise of an artist's palette. Neatly written captions provide plenty of information, such as the fact that during the Second World War the Ministry of Labour made Dunhill ration pipes to two hundred a day because the wood needed



The museum on the lower ground floor.

which allowed drivers to smoke while speeding along at a windy and terrifying ten miles an hour, that smoking first featured in Dunhill's business.

A trip to the new museum on the lower ground floor of the shop provides an excellent overview of exactly how the famous Dunhill

from the Mediterranean area was being limited by U-boat activity.

Perhaps the most impressive of all the historic items on show, however, is back upstairs in the tobacco desk area. The 'My Mixture' book is where Alfred Dunhill recorded his customers' favourite blends of tobacco, and contains entries from authors such as Kipling, in addition to entries by Kings, Queens and Maharajas. Despite damage due to a war-time bomb, this inky, charred, weather-beaten bible of tobacco blends is still used today, and you don't have to be royal or famous to have your mixture recorded. 'Yes, to my pleasure it is still used today,' says Burrows, tapping it proudly. 'We get lots of old pipesmoking chaps coming in here with their grandsons and introducing them to the shop and the book and showing them their blend.'

If you want your own blend in there, then in it goes, as long as it is different from all the others in the book. The mixtures used to be hand-blended in the shop, but recent EC legislation means that only very small quantities can be handled there now, so that responsibility falls to Murrays in Belfast. What blending does go on in the shop is untouched by modern technology - they have used the same baby's bath to blend tobacco for the last seventy-odd years.

Open for business

When the shop suffered an almost direct hit from a bomb during the Second World War, Alfred Henry - the brother - was running the shop, and instead of closing and clearing up he sat outside at a table selling pipes to a line of people. This history of 'opening despite everything' still continues today - despite the Dunhill shop's radical new facelift, it has not once closed for business.

Now that it is entirely ship-shape, the future for the shop looks bright. During my visit a steady flow of customers climbed the stairs to the new area and enjoyed its ambience. The new area, together with the excellent museum, really makes this a must-see for any pipe enthusiast vis-

iting London. No doubt many Londoners will be regular visitors already. A number of events scheduled for this year will highlight the changes. On what would have been Alfred Dunhill's 125th birthday, the shop will hold its annual gala day for pipe customers, and a special tobacco, blended by Alfred Dunhill and dug out of the 'My Mixture' book by Mark Burrows, will be presented to invitees. The anniversary tobacco will be labelled 'A.D. 125'. The museum doubles as a function room for such events, and this year it has already hosted a visit from the Sherlock Holmes Society and the Pipe Club of London.



**The
Shop Floor.**

But what I like best about the 'new' shop are the little gems that appear when you take time to stroll around the display cases and shelves, like the photographs of Princes, Kings and Queens puffing away on their pipes, the priceless straight-grains, the original tobacco blending jars, and the small quotations lifted from books and placed alongside the products on display. Nestling amongst the Amber Roots is one of my favourites, from William Makepeace Thackeray: 'May I die if I should abuse that kindly weed that has given me so much pleasure'. Such quotations remind us of the great history attached to the enjoyment of tobacco, and history is clearly something that the Dunhill shop values and understands.