

IT'S STREETS AHEAD

London needs more areas like Rugby Street. This central enclave has the winning formula – a great community and a good landlord, says **Katie Law**



HISASHI TOKUWASHI

FOR Ben Pentreath it takes approximately 30 seconds to get to work each day. Or it would if he didn't stop to exchange gossip with the other local shopkeepers as he walks from his front door in Great Ormond Street to his architectural design office in Lamb's Conduit Street, before dropping into his new home interiors shop in neighbouring Rugby Street.

The area is an unspoilt enclave of Georgian terraced homes and charming independent shops in the depths of Bloomsbury, where a close-knit community of people appears to have fenced itself off from the ever-increasing commercialisation of the world around them. This feat has been achieved partly through the phenomenal energy and determination of Pentreath, who moved there from Shoreditch in 2003 into a pied-à-terre-sized flat and then rented offices nearby.

Having studied history of art at Edinburgh University and developed his design flair while working for several architects and The Prince's Foundation for the Built Environment, he decided to set up as an architectural designer on his own.

Today, he runs a thriving business designing large-scale residential housing for the Duchy of Cornwall and other clients and has never been busier.



CHRIS TIBBS/PERFECT ENGLISH

Ben Pentreath lives in the flat above the shop (above) and (far left) Susannah Hunter's boutique

Indeed, it was his need to find more office space that led to him becoming a shopkeeper in the first place.

Last year, with his offices bursting at the seams and desperate to find more space, Pentreath noticed two empty shops in Rugby Street.

The street is named after the famous public school and is owned by its trust, the Rugby School Estate, which owns large areas of Bloomsbury and operates a benevolent policy of charging low rents on long leaseholds to reliable and trustworthy tenants.

"I decided to take both and open the world's most boring shop, which I hoped no one would ever come into. Then we could just get on with our design work in the back," says Pentreath.

But a trip to John Derian, a quirky shop on New York's Lower East Side, changed his mind. It was brimming with so many beautiful objects, from découpage glass dishes and limited-edition prints to Moroccan pottery and jewel-coloured cushions, that he was inspired to try something similar and opened Ben Pentreath Ltd last November.

By happy coincidence, a friend, Bridie Hall, offered to manage the shop for him. "Miraculously, it has been a success since the day it opened. We never really expected it to take off but there's nothing quite like it in the area," he says.

He then offered the tiny shop next door to long-standing friend, mentor and sometime business partner Charles Morris, as an outlet to showcase and sell Suffolk-based Morris's traditional handmade steel light fittings. The pair sit comfortably side by side and Morris's lights often find their way into Pentreath's designed buildings.

The combined annual rent is an astonishingly low £18,000 – about a quarter of what Pentreath might pay in a more commercial part of central London. "The businesses work symbiotically and Rugby Street seems to be an ideal model for revitalising London," says Morris, who hopes to spend more time in the shop.

Two doors down is French's Dairy, which once housed London's first dairy but is now a jewellery shop run by Maggie Owen, who also lives above the



MEET THE RUGBY STREET GANG



NICK CUMMINS

Ben Pentreath chats with fellow shop owner Maggie Owen



OSCAR MAY

Kate Edmonson works with Maggie Owen at French's Dairy



HISASHI TOKUWASHI

Susannah Hunter sells individual handbags and home furnishings



NICK CUMMINS

Maggie Owen sells designer jewellery at French's Dairy and lives above the shop



NICK CUMMINS

Pick a tailor-made arrangement of blooms at Dawson Flowers

shop. When she moved from Hampshire to London in search of a new jewellery showroom three years ago, the landlords came straight over to show her what was available.

"They asked whether I minded the fact that it came with living accommodation above. I could not have been more thrilled. It's such a picturesque and historic part of London to live in, a true village with the most incredible community feel, that I wouldn't want to live anywhere else," she says.

In neighbouring Lamb's Conduit Street, Nicola Beauman, who runs Persephone Books, likes to imagine Virginia Woolf shopping there, since the ground floor was once a grocer's. The pillar box outside is mentioned in one of her novels. Today, its windows are decked out in period Bloomsbury style with props alongside the beautiful reprinted books from the inter-war era.

"I love being in this building," she says. "I love the fact that people have been sitting here since the early 1700s. I feel really lucky."

Pentreath agrees. "What I love about the area is how friendly it is. Lots of people live and work around here. It feels quiet and hidden but it's only a 20-minute walk from Trafalgar Square. You don't need to go anywhere for anything; there are quirky clothes shops, a lovely wine bar with chairs sprawling onto the

OF THE REST



Architect Ben Pentreath opened his own design business

HOW TO GET THE LOOK

- **Ben Pentreath Ltd**, 17 Rugby Street, WC1 (020 7430 2526; www.benpentreath.com).
- **The English House**, 17a Rugby Street, WC1 (020 7242 6727; www.theenglishhouse.co.uk). Light fittings.
- **French's Dairy**, 13 Rugby Street, WC1 (020 7404 7070; www.frenchsdairy.com). Maggie Owen's new-wave designer jewellery.
- **Susannah Hunter**, 7 Rugby Street, WC1 (020 7692 3798; www.susannahunter.com). Handbags and home furnishings.
- **Persephone Books**, 59 Lamb's Conduit Street, WC1 (020 7242 9292; www.persephonebooks.co.uk).
- **Dawson Flowers**, 43 Lamb's Conduit Street, WC1 (020 7404 6893; www.dawsonflowers.net).
- **Connock & Lockie**, 33 Lamb's Conduit Street, WC1 (020 7831 2479). Traditional bespoke tailors.
- **Something**, 58 Lamb's Conduit Street, WC1 (020 7430 1516; www.something-shop.com). Toni Horton's Provençal-style shop selling trinkets, homeware, jewellery and fashion.

NICK CUMMARS

NICK CUMMARS

AMY RAY

A shining example of how fair landlords can work with energetic tenants to create a thriving area in the heart of London'

pavement, no traffic, a bookshop, a florist, an organic grocer, a bike shop and restaurants where you can still eat really well for under a tenner a head. There's even an undertaker...

A

ROUND the corner is Pentreath's diminutive 350sq ft flat. The sitting room wall is covered with John Roque's 1764 ancient map of London. In fact, every wall has something of curiosity, from postcards in vintage gilt frames to a mix of early- and mid-20th century watercolours and oils.

Careful measurements were needed everywhere but that did not deter Pentreath from squeezing in his grandparents' splendid Victorian four-poster, which clears the bedroom door frame by one centimetre. "It works perfectly for me, and with my rent at £950 a month, I want to stay for ever. People never seem to move from here, and I hope that never changes."

The area is a shining example of how fair, thoughtful landlords can work together with their energetic tenants to create and maintain an area in the centre of London that is thriving yet retains all the historic charm and individuality of a bygone era.



SHARON BERNARD

Rugby Street (above) and Lamb's Conduit Street form a thriving community of shops and businesses.

Ben Pentreath's quirky interiors shop (left)

French's Dairy (right), home to Maggie Owen's jewellery business



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