

FINANCIAL TIMES

christmas unwrapped





all over the shop

THE CULT SHOP

philip oakley illuminations

A converted pub in East Sussex that also serves as a grotto of lights fantastic

A pit stop in a pub doesn't usually involve locating the bar behind a painting, pulling out a secret set of steps then clambering into a compact space that could accommodate four punters and a barman, at a push. This was the case, however, when I stumbled across The Admiral Benbow in St Leonards-on-Sea, a former public house ingeniously re-envisioned by designer Philip Oakley.

Today, the 1833 building is part workshop, part living space (where the tiny bar is to be found), part shop and all spectacle: a showcase of Oakley's "out of the ordinary lighting", from Hollywood-esque illuminated mirrors (from £900) to his signature metal-edged anchors, letters, hearts and stars (from £850, examples pictured above). These retro-tinged creations may be familiar to those who frequent Richard James on Savile Row and Start in Shoreditch, both of which were designed by Oakley. "I also recently did a neon portrait of the Queen for the jubilee at Richard James, and I've done about 20 years' worth of Christmas windows for them," he says.

Yet, despite the seasonal appeal of brightly coloured lights – and Oakley even has a stint at the famous Blackpool Illuminations under his belt – the festive spirit came to St Leonards early this year: at an open-house event in September, Father Christmas could be found doing a spot of welding in the workshop. "That's because he lives next door,"

explains Oakley. "He's a visual merchandiser, generally, but also a professional Santa Claus."

Taking part in such events is new to Oakley, who only opened up shop earlier this year. "The majority of my work is still London-based, but it's amazing who shows up in St Leonards. We get visitors from all over. We've had a chandelier-maker from Venice come in, and someone from Levi's in Holland." And in turn, they can never be sure what will appear at The Admiral Benbow, as the ground-floor, grotto-like store also houses Oakley's vintage collection: pieces "pulled out of old funfairs or once strapped to a lamp-post on the seafront. They are quite affordable things, starting at about £150."

His favourite design at the moment, though, is of a more personal nature. A giant neon heart formed from words spoken by the priest at his mother's funeral, it is both beautiful and arresting. And, as with the metal letters, neon works can be made to order (£1,000-£10,000). "People tend to think very carefully about these commissions," says Oakley, who has also devised a more impulsive purchase. "Our entry-level illumination is the Fun of the Fair Light [£49.50, pictured left]; a single fairground bulb with a braided cable." Surely, a bright addition to any stocking. **VICTORIA WOODCOCK**
Philip Oakley Illuminations, 2 London Road, St Leonards-on-Sea, East Sussex TN37 6AE (01424-424 119; www.oakleyilluminations.co.uk); Saturday 12pm-6pm and by appointment.



FOR GOODNESS' SAKE

Children first

With Christmas approaching, Kids Company, the charity founded by Camila Batmanghelidjh in 1996, will once again be co-ordinating festive dinners and parties for underprivileged and vulnerable children across London over the coming month. Selfridges is not only inviting its customers to donate money and gifts to the Kids Company cause, but is also stocking exclusive fundraising products – from a sterling silver bracelet by jeweller Irene Danilovich (£40) to a specially commissioned T-shirt by fashion photographer Bruce Weber (from £14). In addition, the department store has partnered with Oxford-based art therapy charity The Art Room, inviting young people to design eight chairs for its window display, with scaled-down miniatures of each style available to purchase in the Selfridges' Christmas boutique. Selfridges, 400 Oxford Street, London W1 (0800-123 400; www.selfridges.com). All profits will benefit the charities: www.theartroom.org.uk; www.kidsco.org.uk.

The right signs

“Last year, our Shere Khan necklace was sold at auction in aid of the Born Free Foundation, raising an incredible £240,000 to help fund its excellent conservation and animal welfare work. When I began work on our new Moon-Signs collection, partnering with the foundation again was a natural choice. We hope that sales will help us to donate over £1m.”

Catherine Best, jewellery designer

Pisces stud earrings in 9ct gold from the 12-design Moon-Signs collection, £340; 01481-237 771; www.catherinebest.com. All profits benefit the Born Free Foundation (www.bornfree.org.uk)

A good yarn

His charities tackle education, unemployment and environmental issues, but this season the Prince of Wales is turning his attention to that annual fashion faux pas – the festive jumper. As part of his Campaign for Wool project, 12 fashion students have been paired with notable brands to create a covetable collection of knitwear. Paul Smith and Yorkshire-born Laura Raddings Brown have collaborated on a subtle, striped design (£250), manufactured by Scottish label Eribé; Pringle is stocking Glasgow School of Art graduate Julia Maclean's lambswool sweater that features the brand's iconic argyle pattern in mohair (£250); and Harvey Nichols has snapped up Brighton-based Tegan Kersey's lightweight knit embellished with a silver-sequin reindeer's head (£195). All sales will fund fashion education programmes across the UK and support ongoing Campaign for Wool projects, which help generate trade for businesses and farmers. 020-7845 5890; www.campaignforwool.org

LINDSAY MACPHERSON AND SIBÉAL POUNDER