



CHANGING WITH

On Church Hill is a retail frame shop situated in Knutsford, a small town near Manchester, England, that dates back to 1016. Today, the town has a population of 13,000 inhabitants, and the shop, established in 1984 by Andrew Mount, occupies a historic building constructed in 1840. Adding to the historic look, On Church Hill is on a cobblestone street next to a busy main street, and occupies 1,200 square feet on two floors.

“This being a town from 1,000 years ago, the streets are very narrow, so the nearest parking is about 100 yards away,” says Mount. “Customers are quite happy to accept the walk, however, as the old town is so attractive.”

The interior is quite traditional as well, with English oak fixtures and ship timbers giving it a very authentic atmosphere. “It’s the sort of place that American tourists find so charming,” adds Mount. Similarly, the framing projects at On Church Hill are mostly very traditional. “Rarely do we get asked for, or even suggest, creative mat cutting,”

Surrounded by history, an English frame shop adapts to new market trends

Mount says. “There is simply no room here for a CMC. For anything oversized or needing multiple openings, we have a friendly framer in another town that does that sort of work for us.”

In the UK, there are no big box framers, and Internet framing is still a long way behind what it is in the US, so the only real competition comes from other framers. Fortunately for Mount, there are no

other custom framers in the same town as On Church Hill.

The shop has a layout typical of many frame shops in the UK, where space is often at a premium. That leads to making the most out of a limited floor plan. Mount says, “I believe that it’s important to maximize display and selling areas and to keep the workshop to

a minimum.” So neatly packed into a workshop area of just 170 square feet is a Morso chopper, an Alfa under-pinner incorporated into a workbench, and a Keencut vertical cutter. A new Valiani pneumatic mat cutter was bought this year to replace the ancient Speedmat.



THE TIMES

By Keith Hewitt

Despite such space limitations, the shop does not seem overcrowded. “We employ one full-timer plus two part-timers, but there is still enough space for all of us not to get in each other’s way,” says Mount. “Our workbench is on casters, so it can be moved to accommodate extra-large jobs.”

The sales area is also compact but efficient. “We display about 400 wood corner samples from Larson-Juhl and 48 aluminium samples from Nielsen Bainbridge,” says Mount. “We offer 70 matboards, the Artique conservation collection, and glass is available in either regular, non-reflective, or museum quality. All of our moulding is length; chop is only used for very big mouldings.

“Our average turnaround time is a week to 10 days, depending on the level of work. We carry very little stock,” adds Mount. “What we do have in house is sup-

plemented by a weekly delivery from four suppliers: Larson-Juhl, Nielsen Bainbridge, Lion, and Wessex. The last two are major UK distributors.”

All this emphasis on space limitations doesn’t mean

that the shop is stuck in the past, however. “For promotions, we use Facebook, Twitter, and our website,” says Mount. “We also have A-boards outside and frequently change the displays in three street-facing windows. Non-framing merchandise is also placed in envelopes that promote all the aspects of our business.”

Inventory and pricing are also electronic. Currently, the shop uses a computerized cost-

ing system, Frameman, but that is about to be replaced with a Northern Ireland system, Estlite. “Our average frame job is the equivalent of \$125, and payment is 80 percent by credit card and 20 percent cash,” adds Mount.



On Church Hill is a compact but efficient frame shop: the workbench is on casters, so it can be moved to accommodate extra-large jobs.



The shop's in-house stock is supplemented by a weekly delivery from four suppliers: Larson-Juhl, Nielsen Bainbridge, Lion, and Wessex.



To drive up foot traffic to the store, On Church Hill began selling cards and customized balloons for special occasions.

"We no longer accept personal checks. Our typical custom framing job is 24"x32" and has a double mat, 2" moulding, and standard glass."

As traditional as On Church Hill and its surroundings may be, the store has had to adapt to a changing economy to survive. When Mount first established the business in 1984 as Church Hill Gallery, it featured original art and prints, mostly by Russell Flint and L.S. Lowry. That side of the business boomed in the 1980s, but, over time, Mount saw that more and more people were reluctant to enter the gallery. His biggest challenge was to find a satisfactory replacement. He quickly realized, "We needed to start framing more to satisfy those who liked the pictures but wanted to change the frame."

As framing expanded and the gallery continued to decline, Mount developed the idea to sell cards in the area occupied by the gallery. In 1996, the Original Card Shop opened, which is an exclusive, up-market card shop inside On Church Hill. Today, it has become the retailer's main draw.

"Customers come in, buy a card for \$5, and start to feel comfortable enough to stay and browse through the originals and prints that we still carry. They also see framing available on-site. The opening of the card shop immediately took our foot traffic from three to 20 per day. Today, we get 50 to 60 customers a day." The gallery is gone, and today the cards occupy most of the ground floor and bring in two-thirds of the store's sales. Framing,

which has been done on-site for 28 years, now accounts for the other third.

Mount has also very recently added inflated balloons. The gas bottle sits right next to the framing table, so while these colorful additions are being inflated, customers get to see and remember the custom framing facilities. "Balloons have an excellent profit margin, and they also attract a younger clientele," Mount says. Using sales techniques similar to those used when consulting with a framing customer, they create customized balloons for special occasions.

With all these changes, in 2014, Mount realized that the old name of Church Hill Gallery was out of date and changed the store's name to On Church Hill. It says where the

shop is located and allows him to continue as a picture framer while being able to add other products that might help drive added footfall. His skill lies in his willingness to try new ideas when the old ones no longer work.

It may surprise some framers who rely solely on framing that only a third of Mount's income comes from custom framing, but as he says, "We need to cater to the needs of the town. If that means selling cards and balloons, I am happy to add these products in order to survive. We are simply changing with the times." **PFM**



On Church Hill owner Andrew Mount with employees Cerys Mallan and Sarah McKenzie.

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