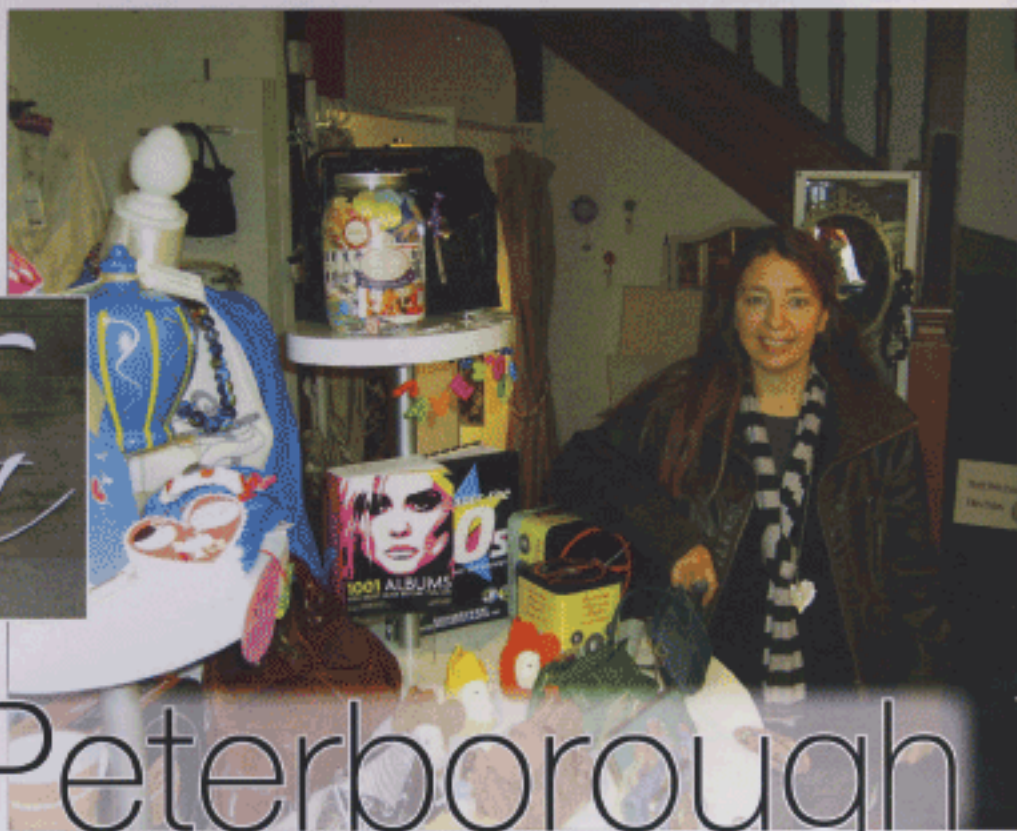


## RETAIL INTERVIEW

Reba, Peterborough

# Reba



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Over the next couple of issues, Gifts Today will help you get to know our contributors better by taking a closer look at their retail premises. We start with Rachel Parkin's gift shop, Reba

**P**eterborough's most notable feature is undoubtedly its cathedral. Largely dating from the 12th century, its magnificent architecture towers over the town centre.

Situated literally in the cathedral grounds (as part of the outer wall) is the gift shop Reba, an independent boutique owned by entrepreneur Rachel Parkin, who also runs the thriving Balagan jewellery empire.

The shop, based below street level, looks out onto the Peterborough Guildhall. Its high, vaulted ceilings are a stunning feature and the shop is also (apparently) haunted by a friendly ghost. We spoke to Rachel Parkin about the shop and her views on current retail trends.

**Gifts Today:** How did you get started in retail?

**Rachel Parkin:** By accident! After a long trip through the Far East, backpacking and working in Japan, I bought some jewellery and an assortment of other products that caught my eye and started off with a market stall in Peterborough. This, coupled with festivals and events was fun for a while, but eventually the cold winters got the better of me, and I

started looking around for a shop with heating!

**GT:** How long have you had this particular shop?

**RP:** 15 years, although it feels like two - the time has absolutely flown by!

**GT:** What is the history of the building?

**RP:** The building is a scheduled ancient monument, which involved lots of meetings with English Heritage when we first took it over. It is actually a medieval gaol, with walls about a foot thick and tiny windows for shooting arrows out of (I assume). We also have the hangman's cell in the shop, which is where they used to keep condemned prisoners before they were taken for hanging - we can see the marks on the doors where they counted off the days! The girls in the shop swear it's haunted, but I've never seen anything.

**GT:** Do people ever wander in, assuming that it is the Cathedral's gift shop?

**RP:** They used to, and it still happens occasionally now. Mostly they come in and ask directions and get distracted by our gorgeous vaulted ceilings. To be honest, we've been here so long now we're part of the city. If I'm introduced



someone new, I always tell them, it's the shop loved by women, but not so much by men!"

Q: Where does the name, "Reba", come from?

A: I made it up. For many years we've been called Balagan, but with the wholesale business also being located in the city it got a bit confusing sometimes, so when we had a refit a couple of years ago we decided to change the name. It was time, and it signified a change of direction for the shop too. Reba is a shortening of "Yareeba!" which sounded fun, energetic, and quirky - which fitted us perfectly.

Q: How do you promote the shop?

A: Our website will be ready very soon (hopefully by the time this article comes out) and we promote ourselves with a blog (rebaonline.blogspot.com), which is fun to do. Locally we've got good relationships with our local paper, the Peterborough Evening Telegraph, where I write a monthly column, and with Nene Living, a local lifestyle magazine. We're quite lucky because our central location means that people who come to town will find us, so we don't have to advertise too much.

Q: We do have a monthly newsletter, which we email out to our database of around 2,000 customers at the beginning of each month, and sometimes in the middle if we've got breaking news! We have a birthday club and we run puzzles and prizes in our newsletters, which always get a good response. Oh, and helium balloons work for us, because of our set back location - bright pink balloons always catch attention.

Q: How many staff do you employ?

A: Two full time and five part time.

Q: Tell me about your other shop.

A: It's a contemporary jewellers in Cambridge, also, strangely enough, in a quirky building. This time it's

art deco! I think life is too short to spend it in ugly surroundings - I like quirky buildings with character. We sell branded jewellery and watches there, including Pandora, Breil, Jackie Brazil, Balagan (obviously) D&G and a host of others.

Q: How do you divide your time between Balagan and the shops?

A: It is a struggle - I have to be honest. I have a great team who know what they're doing. We lay out the months in advance, particularly for promotions purposes. We have a lot of reporting systems in place, so you can see if something is going wrong fairly quickly. We have systems for floor walks, checklists, personal development of staff, and strict budgets.

Q: Which product lines are you most excited by at the moment?

A: Reba sells a lot of jewellery, both fashion and silver, clothes and handbags. On the clothes front my favourite brand is B-Young and Nica handbags are a nice young collection.

On the gift front, East of India is a very strong seller, as is Spaceform. We've been selling both of them for years, but they keep renewing their collections and going forward, so it keeps selling. Momiji is a nice line that keeps evolving.

I am personally loving our Lego men necklace collection, which just makes me smile every time I see it. I have the Biggles necklace, although I'm not sure what that says about me...

Q: What recent trends have you noticed on the high street?

A: Nicheing and niche marketing! The multiples do what they do so well, and with such good mark-ups, that it's not really possible to compete with them, so creating a unique look and marketing that difference seems to me to be the logical way forward.

Locally we have too many phone shops, estate agents and multiples,



so I would have to say the cloning of our high streets - which I think is really sad and quite dull. While I'm not against the multiples I do think we need a mix of shops for our high streets to work and remain vibrant. I travel a lot for my business and I don't see this cloning to anywhere near the same extent in other countries, so I think we need to be very aware of this phenomenon.

The All-Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group listed its concerns for the future of the High Street Britain 2015 and it's a sobering read. Small shops, like mine, are part of the fabric of our communities and, let's be honest, we're under threat from lots of angles.

So, nicheing and cloning would be my big two trends, one positive and one negative, but I'm a glass half full type of person, so I'm promoting the positives!

