

In the market for new glasses? Get to know Cubitts, the modern spectacle maker

We spoke to Tom Broughton, founder at spectacle retailer Cubitts, about their 'repair and rehab' approach, the struggles of the early days of business, and their brand new store in a unique, historical setting.

What was your professional background before Cubitts?

I spent the better part of a decade working in several corporate jobs for organisations including TFL, Spotify, the BBC World Service and children's television. Career procrastination, in retrospect.

What gave you the idea to launch the business?

I started wearing glasses during my teenage years. I realised many of my then icons – people like Morrissey and James Dean – wore spectacles too. And glasses gradually became part of my identity.

I couldn't understand why – in spite of this – the general spectacles offer was so sterile. It felt that most glasses were designed for people who didn't want to wear them.

The more research I did, the more I uncovered a fascinating three-century industry that nobody knew about. I thought I could do a little bit in telling that story, and dragging spectacles into the modern age.

What makes Cubitts different from other spectacles companies?

I think we make spectacles for people who are proud to wear spectacles. Well designed, beautifully made, fairly priced – frames that last many many years, and be an extension of you. Bespoke is a key part of what we do by measuring an individual's exact facial measurements, to create a frame unique to them.

We also have a strong “repair and rehab” approach. A good pair of spectacles should be a lifetime investment, so on the first birthday of your purchase, we reserve a spot for them in Cubitts Rehab. The lenses will be removed and cleaned, the frame polished and deep-cleaned in an ultrasonic bath, and the screws tightened and the hinges checked.

Customers can also pop into our stores (we have 13 across the UK) at any time for a quick polish and adjustment, on us, to ensure their fit is still pitch-perfect. Every Cubitts store also has an on-site repair workshop for tackling more complex projects.

All this positions us as innovators rather than disruptors. We want to bring positive change to the eyewear landscape with bespoke services, an exceptional product featuring Cubitts' signature styles and colours, and an ethos of repair in the place of rampant upselling.

Tom Broughton © Cubitts

How are you funded?

I spent a decade saving to launch the business, but within only a few months, the money was gone. The last of the savings went on buying out my former business partner (we parted ways shortly after Cubitts began). It was a pretty dreadful time. At the lowest ebb, I phoned my parents in tears and they loaned me £20,000, which kept us going for another few weeks.

During that time, we were contacted by a customer, Gary, who expressed an

interest in investing. After meeting for a coffee on the Caledonian Road, he agreed to invest £100,000 into the business for an equity stake.

How big is your team now?

We currently operate in the UK, with 107 people and 13 stores – ten in London, one in Brighton, one in Cambridge and one in Leeds. We're hoping to expand to 15 stores by the end of this year; we're also planning to open our first international store in 2023. But we want to be the best, not the biggest. Growth for the sake of growth is a pretty pointless pursuit.

What do you consider as your biggest achievement since launching Cubitts?

Surviving. It's pretty brutal, particularly after a two-year pandemic when 80% of our income vanished overnight. Seeing that first person wear a pair of Cubitts spectacles out in the world made me shed a tear. And launching our first physical store in Soho was a huge moment, too. We just saw our best month yet in March over the past eight and a half years, which was a very proud moment and promising looking to the future.

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What's the best and hardest thing about being a founder?

The best part is the chance to work and spend time with the most interesting, inspiring, hilarious, passionate people, and the breadth and variety of how you spend your time.

The worst is the stress, anxiety and the relentless nature of it all. I'm not sure you can overcome it – or I haven't found it yet. It's more about managing it, which is really about finding brilliant people to share the burden.

What is your favourite Cubitts product and why?

Cruikshank. It's a tank of a frame, with 'blade' sides, which you don't really see anymore. I wear it everyday, and feel lost without them – literally, since my

eyesight is so poor. I also love our bookmarks, which will be coming soon.

Tell me about your new store?

We just opened at 123 Cheapside, a five-minute walk away from St Paul's Cathedral. The store lies beneath the shade of London's oldest plane tree in the City.

It's a beautiful history corner site, with an amazing history. The building used to belong to L&R Wooderson, hosiers, glovers and shirt-makers, who operated from there for over half a century. During the renovation process, we unearthed original L&R Wooderson signage, untouched for decades, which is now on display in the basement area we discovered during the fit out and where eye examinations take place.

Prior to L&R Wooderson, the site was home to a publisher of political cartoons and prints from 1828 to 1835. So, in ode to their legacy, we've partnered with The Cartoon Museum to curate a series of spectacular framed facsimile artworks. We also have an original tapestry from the 1951 Festival of Britain, along with historic photos of 123 Cheapside, exhibited throughout.

What does the rest of year and beyond hold for Cubitts?

With inflation, economic uncertainty, the war in Ukraine, the ongoing pandemic, and impending environmental collapse, who really knows? But our plan is to continue our careful and considered ascent, focusing on how we can be better rather than bigger.

As well as our new stores, our main projects are around sizing (more sizes and fits, driven by data-centric design), technology (taking bespoke spectacles to a global audience), circularity (helping people care for their frames for longer, and then providing a way to recycle them).

Tom Broughton is founder at Cubitts.