

Paul Smith

122

122

BEING SIR PAUL

Fashion designer Paul Smith made Notting Hill his home in the mid-70s. He reveals why he loves the area so much in this exclusive interview for Grove. By Lucy Land

'I hope I'm not late.' Paul Smith arrives at his office five minutes before our 10am-scheduled interview. At 60, he shows no signs of slowing down: he has already had his daily swim and two meetings. He also continues to be chief executive, principal shareholder and chief designer of the eponymous fashion brand he started in 1970. He is still at the forefront of trends (note how Mika has shot to pop superstardom since fronting a Paul Smith campaign and I expect there will have been a stampede for his limited-edition Alexander Girard dolls by the time this is published) and it's soon clear it's all down to his love of his work.

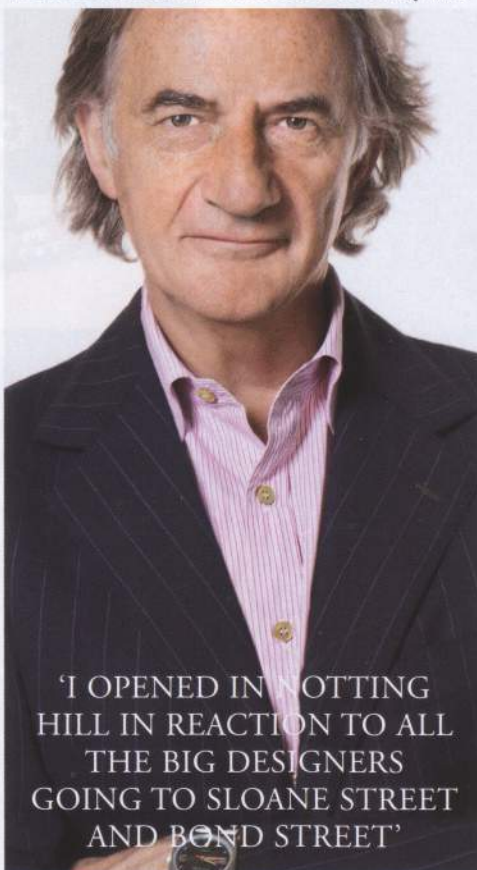
'I spent three days designing and making that T-shirt,' he replies to my query about some framed photos and a letter on the reception wall. The photos show a young boy proudly holding the quirky T-shirt and the letter expresses his thanks (and mentions his hamster). 'He still writes regularly. He's 13 now.' Paul leads the way up to his office and leaves me with his secretary, Carla and an invitation to have a good nose around. Books fill the shelves; art adorns the walls; boxes of toys and curiosities are scattered about. 'Paul gets every handwritten letter framed and we reply to every one,' Carla says with pride. On his return, Paul shows me the more creative items he's been sent such as a hand-stitched envelope and letter and a Christmas bauble with the stamp and address stuck to it. 'We have been receiving things from this person for the past 15 years; a ski, a traffic cone – you name it. We don't know who it's from – male or female,' he smiles. 'There's enough seriousness in this world. We can all do with a bit of fun and madness.'

The ideal model for his design aesthetic, Paul is – in his own words – 'tall and mad.' Today, he is wearing his signature stripy (red and white) shirt and blue jeans. He compliments me on the kimono-style top I'm wearing from Sundar in Portobello Green Arcade. 'I go to Portobello market most Friday mornings, sometimes on a Saturday and often on a Sunday afternoon,' he enthuses. The clothes and objects give him plenty of inspiration. 'I've been going for years and years.' He isn't exaggerating. He first visited the area as a student and moved from Nottingham to Notting Hill in the mid-70s with his wife, artist Pauline Denyer, a born-and-bred West Londoner whom he met in 1969 and married in 2000 – the same day he received his knighthood. Indeed, Pauline has long been a driving force behind his fashion business and Paul's conversation is peppered with affectionate references to her.

'When I arrived here at 18 there was plenty of amazing music because of the West Indian influence. The area was originally full of antique and art shops and sadly, very few are left now,' he says wistfully. 'Like a lot of places, the rents have

risen so the really interesting shopkeepers have had to close down. The big companies are the only ones that can afford the rents.' Paul partly blames himself. 'But in my defence I opened in Notting Hill in reaction to all the big designers going to Sloane Street and Bond Street,' he reveals self-deprecatingly. 'I was saying, "Look, you can open in interesting areas; you don't have to go to the cliché areas." I went there because I love the area so much,' he continues. 'To be honest, I think it was starting to happen anyway. Then, the film [Notting Hill] didn't help because that drew attention to the area in a very commercial way.'

Paul is naturally optimistic. 'It's great that one of my favourites, the Lacey Gallery on Westbourne Grove, is still there. Mr Lacey was



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originally a stallholder on Portobello Road and his shop is full of character,' he says. 'And thank goodness for the market and the carnival which are part of the character of the area. It's still a lovely area. It's still very residential.'

Paul's passion for the area is infectious. Want to know where to rent an old art film or the latest release? 'Steve and Simon at Video City [Notting Hill Gate] are really informed.' Want something light to eat? 'New Culture Revolution [also Notting Hill Gate] is a great noodle bar.' Interested in design? 'Museum of Brands, Packaging and Advertising is run by a real

collector.' Names and places trip off his tongue.

Paul's passion for the area is perhaps, most evident in Westbourne House, which is (like all his stores) not only individual but also complements the building's history. The inspiration for the shop-in-a-house came from his visits to the couture fashion shows in Paris with his wife during his 20s. 'There used to be one or two couture shows a day over two weeks in Paris. The shows used to take place in the house of the designer – either in a little French hotel or a small house – and there would be just 30 people in the audience so it was a very personal affair. Since seeing these little fashion shows I always had a dream of having a shop inside a house.'

Interestingly, the shop was previously home to a restaurant. The reason that the council allowed the premises to be used as a restaurant was because one of the home's early inhabitants of the mid-19th-century house was a pharmacist, who received permission to sell medicines from the house. 'Otherwise, I don't think we could have got permission to open in a house,' he admits. 'I've tried to respect the feeling of the house: the rooms are either named after their original function [such as the 'dining room'] or named after previous occupants or people who lived in or developed the area,' he says. Unsurprisingly, Westbourne House attracts Paul Smith fans from across the world as well as plenty of locals.

Paul also supports causes close to his heart. As well as the Paul Smith Scholarship at Slade School of Fine Art and Royal College of Art, Paul supports the Octopus Challenge, which was set up in 2002 by Greg Scott, former owner of Mr Christian's delicatessen on Elgin Crescent, in memory of his son who died of cancer at the age of 17. 'Greg's such a friendly person and he was so devastated when his son died so, like a lot of his regulars, I was more than happy to try to help,' he says modestly. His support has included sponsoring, designing and making T-shirts in aid of the charity. This year, he's sponsoring a number of employees in the bike ride. 'We support a lot of charities, not just financially but also emotionally,' he reveals.

There's no doubt that Paul fits more into his day than the average person and what's more, is a bundle of energy. 'I get my energy from my love of life. I'm a very positive person,' he says simply. 'At the weekends, Pauline and I don't go to lots of dinner parties or private views. We are quite happy to just do things together which is nice after a long time together. We go to the cinema; have meals; we love art so we go to a lot of art exhibitions.' Tall, he maybe, but Paul doesn't seem to be all that mad. Perhaps just madly passionate about (in no particular order, of course) his work, his wife and life in general.