



Palmer's Pet Shop

By Jessica Lykken



Modern image of Pammers storefront window (now Yumchaa) -- Credit: Hornbeam Arts

Tucked amidst colorful shops and historic brick buildings in Camden, London, England, you can find locals and tourists alike socializing on the front patio of a small café. Yet, despite serving drinks and pastries, the signage above the Parkway windows paints a very different story.

In striking black and white font, it reads: PALMERS. On the sides, it advertises Regent Pet Stores, naturalists, monkeys, and talking parrots. While it might seem like simple historical preservation to the unsuspecting customer, Palmers was a beloved and famed shop that continues to live in the hearts of those who visited and worked there when it still operated as a pet store.

Opened by George Palmer in 1918, Palmers supplied pets to numerous people. Notable customers include Winston Churchill and Charlie Chaplin, both of whom allegedly purchased kittens from the shop. But the pets on display weren't limited to puppies and kittens. The shop regularly attracted audiences with its showcase of exotic animals like monkeys, reptiles, birds, amphibians, invertebrates and more.

Reflecting Victorian commodity and spectacle culture, the rise of pet shops in the 19th and 20th centuries meant that the success of Palmers can at least partially be attributed to, as the saying goes, "right place, right time."



Credit: Augustus Zache's Pet Stores, 196 Great Portland Street, from George Sim's Living London (1902-1903)

An article by British historians Jane Hamlett and Rebecca Preston underlines how throughout this period, "the sale of pet animals of all kinds (not only exotics) was an increasing feature of towns and cities across Britain" and "the pet trade was prominent in London because of the scale and diversity of its retail culture, as well as its longstanding traditions of the import and local capture of birds and animals."

Below is a Palmers advertisement from 1924. It underlines how the shop is one of "the largest importers of goldfish in England," and that customers can purchase animals and goods such as "talking parrots, monkeys, tortoises, puppies, reptiles, fish globes, aquariums, etc." The ad emphasizes Hamlett and Preston's observation about the prominence of the English pet trade, especially in the realm of aquariums and fishkeeping.

BUY YOUR
GOLDFISH, FOODS, ETC.,

Direct from

GEORGE PALMER

PROPRIETOR OF

The Regent Pet Stores

83, PARK STREET,
CAMDEN TOWN, LONDON, N.W.1

Phone : 8856 Hampstead.

Telegrams : Domestipet, Norwest, London

The Largest Importers of Goldfish in
England. Send P.C. for Present Prices.

Also in Stock : Talking Parrots, Monkeys,
Tortoises, Puppies, Reptiles, Fish Globes,
Aquariums, Etc.

BIRD FOODS SUPPLIED

to the

LONDON ZOOLOGICAL SOCIETY

The
MUSEUM OF
AQUARIUM & PET
HISTORY

1924 Palmers Pet Shop Advertisement -- MOAPH collection

The
MUSEUM OF
AQUARIUM & PET
HISTORY

Over time, it also became more common for animals to be marketed in a way that emphasized their amicable manner to convince customers of their ability to connect with humans. By highlighting their docile nature as pets, children naturally became a focus of pet store display advertising. A great example of this can be seen in a 1957 feature of Palmers created by the British television broadcaster, Independent Television News (ITN).¹ See the video on the MOAPH website.



Stillshot from 1957 Palmers feature on (ITN).¹

The feature opens with clips of children excitably looking at puppies and kittens through Palmers' display windows. After asking the kids a couple of questions, the interviewer is given an interior tour of the shop by George Palmer.

After showing the interviewer a monkey and discussing the shop some, he explains that "birds, especially budgerigars, were the most popular purchase, and were often bought by children as they made 'wonderful pets.'" The 1963 picture below depicts two boys interacting with a parrot on the left, and a mother browsing Palmers with her young child on the right, further underscoring the magnetism of pet shops to the youth.



Credit: London Museum

Children weren't the only ones who loved Palmers, however. Nicky Grace, an ex-employee who worked at Palmers in the 1970s under John Palmer, recalled her time there as the most amazing year of her life. Grace explained, "It was like a dynasty, and the customers came from far and wide." While employed at the shop, she helped sell animals such as giant snakes, tree frogs, scorpions, and iguanas.

The last original employee, George Palmer's niece, Pamela Dearman, passed away in 2024. Lovingly known by her nickname "Princess Pam of Parkway," she had run the shop for more than 50 years.

Now a café, the 35-37 Parkway building that housed Palmers, continues to preserve the original signage. Perhaps more importantly, the shop's legacy lives on in the memory of visitors. People in multiple internet forums and blogs reminisce about the time they spent there, recounting stories about exotic animals and passionate staff. As Grace put it, "It was a time gone, another world, another life, with the kind of people you don't much get to meet these days, and I'm so very lucky to have experienced a small part of it."

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