

# Ashley's: changing with times, guided by tradition

Ashley Furs is about to put a new face on things.

It will, of course, still sell furs — and store, clean and restyle them — as it has done for 57 years.

It will still offer high-end ladies' clothing.

But it's also going to be including less expensive lines of classic sportswear and clothing; a range encompassing Canadian lines like Irving Samuel and Simon Chang; German lines like Mondri, Stillman, Ravens & Huckle; more casual lines like Boston Trader.

And that's just the beginning.

Soon, Ashley Furs will be known simply as "Ashley's" — a change, says third-generation owner John D.G. Ashley, that more properly reflects the store today.

"People know us for furs," he said. "Because they already know us for what we are in the community, it will just better represent what we have to offer."

Signage and letterhead will change.

There will also, he said, be "major renovations and structural changes to the facade of the building" — including moving the entrance and adding a rear door. He expects the renovated building to be a "showpiece" — but still welcoming to the broader base of customers to whom Ashleys will appeal.

In addition, his office will move from upstairs to the main floor "so I can have a better rapport with my customers. I spend too much time up here."

And a new parking lot — now in progress behind the store — will have room for 12 cars, making Ashley's more easily accessible.



Grant K. Ashley



John D.G. Ashley



Douglas G. Ashley

The whole project will be launched with a "major" renovation sale that begins May 24.

Ashley says none of the changes are a response to the animal rights movement, which he says has had "little or no effect."

Rather, they are a continuation of a change of focus that began in 1969 when the business moved across the street to its current Front and Victoria location and first entered the ladies' clothing market.

"Furs are about 50 per cent of our retail now," he said.

Once, they were all.

The business was founded by John's grandfather, Grant K. Ashley, after a Montreal furrier loaned him some coats and said to "pay me when you can."

"He used to pick up coats for storage on his bicycle," John recalled.

John's father Douglas G. Ashley, who currently co-owns the business with his wife Lois and John, started work there 49 years ago at age 15.

Ashley Furs manufactured their fur coats in those days, and they haven't forgotten the WWII order for 150,000 fur collars to go on coats made by Deacon Brothers.



"I started sweeping the floor in the back room," added John. "I've been the truck driver, the delivery boy. My grandfather taught me my trade; we are furriers, not just salesmen."

But times change, and Ashley's intends to be there — downtown, because "I believe in downtown; I think the swing is toward a downtown market."

"I really think the '90s are going to be totally different than what we've seen before," John said.

"I think they'll be profitable, but only to those retailers who really provide a service to their customers. I think the trend is to one-stop shopping. To keep that customer, you'd better really provide what they need."