

Harrods sale: So what's in store?

Mohamed Fayed loved Harrods so much that he wanted to be buried there. Now he's sold it. Olga Craig explores our most glittering emporium



It has been a byword for glamour and excess for more than a century and a half. And the backdrop for some of the world's most lavish and, at times, eccentric window displays. It is a quintessentially British landmark and tourist attraction. Yet we British come more to browse – to marvel at its magnificence and its bling – than to buy. But on one thing Harrods has always been insistent: there is only one sale.

And that came yesterday when Mohamed Fayed, who bought the 4.5 acre department store in 1985 for £615 million, confirmed that he had sold the London emporium, which boasts 330 departments, for £1.5 billion to Qatar Holdings, owned by the state's royal family.

The sale has been rumoured in the business world for the past month but Mr Fayed has persistently denied it, saying just three weeks ago: "People approach us from Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar. Fair enough. But I put two fingers up to them all. It is not for sale. This is not Marks & Spencer or Sainsbury. It is a special place that gives people pleasure. There is only one

Mecca.”

Now, however, the owner of Fulham football club, who is thought to be worth £650 million, has changed his mind after several days of secret talks that saw the deal finally signed and sealed in the early hours of yesterday.

The news will have come as a surprise to Mr Fayed’s staff. The eccentric owner spends two hours each day walking around the store and has always said he wants to be mummified when he dies and buried in a mausoleum in the roof. For all that, the store, which attracts 15 million shoppers annually and whose motto is *Omnia Omnibus Ubique* – All Things for All People – will doubtless retain its cherished place in people’s hearts, despite years of accusations that Mr Fayed’s penchant for Egyptian splendour is a touch too tacky for Middle England.

As Mary Portas, the retail consultant, points out: "Harrods can be a tad kitsch for some tastes. But there is a wonderful international glory about it. In global retailing, it is on the map. It is, simply, exceptionally good. Its service is exceptional.”

Ms Portas, who presents the BBC’s *Mary Queen of Shops*, cut her retail teeth in the Knightsbridge store, where she was responsible for window dressing, before moving to arch-rival Harvey Nichols. "It was a terrific training ground,” she says. "Yes, it is slightly Hollywood. But that over-the-top feel simply adds to its glamour, to its overall feeling of luxury and extravagance.”

Over the past few years, Mr Fayed has spent £400 million refurbishing the store. And though he has restored much of its period elegance, the ritzy, £75 million, Egyptian-themed room, with its ostentatious escalator and huge sculptures and carvings, has attracted much criticism. "Admittedly it is kitsch, very Disneyland,” says Ms Portas. "It lacks taste. But what is still true is that some departments are easily the best in the world. Its food hall is perfection. The home floor, on the other hand, is boring. It lacks the seduction of the rest of the store. Harrods is simply an iconic store. But it is a massive tourist attraction that is kept afloat by Russians and Arabs,

rather than the indigenous British buyer.”

While thousands have turned to the internet, Harrods’ sheen of luxury and its iconic status have, for the most part, kept the recession at bay. Stella Keaton, a retail analyst, points out: "Over the past five years, there has been a revolution in how we shop – many of us do so online. But the lure of the exclusiveness of Harrods has neatly sidestepped that. People don’t shop in Harrods seeking value for money. It’s as much about coming out clutching that distinctive trademark carrier bag as anything else; it is about cachet and, yes, perhaps a bit of nose-in-the-air snobbery for some.

"There is a certain type of lady who likes to mention over the dinner table that she shops in Harrods,” Ms Keaton continues. “Especially its food hall. Harrods doesn’t brand its value. It brands its prestige. Its timelessness. Its solidity. It is the cornerstone of the English establishment.

“Not for nothing has it long boasted that whatever you want, it can supply. And people love being associated with that. Where else can you be assured of 28 restaurants serving everything from high tea to tapas, a watch repair service, a tailor, a barber’s shop, wine stewards and picnic hampers? If it exists, Harrods sells it.”

Though its name shrieks glamour, Harrods has long courted controversy – perhaps, in that rather English eccentric manner, that is another element of its enduring popularity. It remains the only British department store to sell fur and, up until the early Seventies, still boasted an exotic pets department.

With its celebrated attention to detail, it is hardly surprising that one of Harrods’ oft-told and probably apocryphal anecdotes is of the imperious shopper who asked the exotic animals head salesman: "I would like a camel, please.” His immediate answer was: "Certainly, sir. One hump or two?”

Its best-known exotic animal was Christian the lion, the star of a popular YouTube clip. He lived in the store as a cub, but Harrods was keen to be rid

of him. On several occasions, Christian escaped from the exotic animals section at night. Usually he sneaked into the carpet department, which sold goatskin rugs, causing havoc.

Even after the live animals department closed, the store continued its love affair with exotic species. Eight years ago it hired a live Egyptian cobra to protect the shoe counter.

Its mission was to guard a £62,000 pair of ruby-, sapphire- and diamond-encrusted sandals launched by designer Rene Caovilla. The serpent had only one day on duty. The shoes were sold in three hours.