

Vintage va-va-voom

HANNAH FINCH TALKS TO THE HONITON COUPLE WHO SUPPLY FINISHING TOUCHES TO A-LIST EVENTS

MAIN IMAGE: BOWTIE AND BELLE PHOTOGRAPHY

For Greg and Ginny Banks, the beginnings of Virginia's Vintage Hire began with a job lot of 300 second-hand chairs bought for £800 on eBay.

Since then, the husband and wife team behind one of the UK's top vintage hire brands have been busy bagging impressive clients including Burberry, Liberty and Ralph Lauren. It all started when they turned magpie to create their own low-key wedding five years ago.

The couple had nowhere near 300 guests for their woodland wedding on the banks of the River Dart in Dittisham.

In fact, they only had 20 but spotting an opportunity, forked out for all the chairs and started selling them on for a profit.

Little did they know that the eBay deal would lead to a new career for the pair of them, giving up their careers in the yacht industry – to turn entrepreneurs stumbling onto an untapped market.

"We had no business plan," admits Ginny. "It has kind of just grown organically."

In fact, it was the level of interest in the chairs – now named the Ludlow

chairs and still highly sought after – that affirmed that there was money to be made.

Soon enough, Ginny was getting email after another asking for more and more chairs even before they had said 'I do' at their own wedding.

Fearful they would run out before the nuptials, the pair decided to hire them out to another bride for £1 each.

"Then, when guests at her wedding got in touch saying 'could we hire them too,' we started to realise we were onto something."

And it couldn't have come at a better time for Greg, who had just been made redundant from his job in yacht maintenance.

Just over a year later, Ginny, realising that there were not enough hours in the day to answer all of the enquiries, and decided to give up the security of a salary as

a yacht broker in Plymouth.

And that was all before they invested in their own website for the business in 2013.

They have since supplied some very posh dos indeed – from the Paris cross back chairs used at Sean Bean's wedding in Dorset to the Jonah chairs for The One Show's Alex Jones' big



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day at Cardiff Castle. It's not just weddings though, the team also supplied the Facebook Summer party and the launch of fashion brand Kent & Curwen's Autumn Winter collection with David Beckham at London Fashion Week.

"There have been a lot of famous bottoms on those seats," laughs Greg.

With an average of 10 events a week during the summer months and 17 in just one weekend earlier this month, their client list reads like a who's who of the fashion world.

Take a look at the website and all the big names are there from Hermes to Liberty, Bulgari to Burberry.

"The very first quote for Selfridges went up on the noticeboard. We were so chuffed," recalls Ginny.

Greg said: "It gives people confidence that if we delivered for those clients then we could do the same for them."

Operating from a home office at the couple's cottage near Honiton and warehouse space at Dunkswell, the company acts as a trend setter, sourcing one-off unique items, storing them and delivering on time.

After five years, Ginny said that their client base, skills and experience



IMAGE: STACEY PITSAUIDES

IMAGE: LUCY DAVENPORT PHOTOGRAPHY



IMAGE: JON CRAIG PHOTOGRAPHY



means that they can stay ahead of the many copycats who have sprung up in their wake.

She said: "When we get frustrated about the businesses who are just copying what we do, I remind myself that they are so far behind us on the road.

"We are at a stage now where we can use the experience we have behind us to do the things that the smaller, newer companies cannot do. We want to elevate what we are able to offer in terms of quality and one-off unique pieces."

Virginia's Vintage Hire were named winners of this year's FT2G programme, securing themselves £20,000 of business support.

The business is now on the cusp of yet another growth spurt with plans to relaunch the website, take on an in-house stylist to create the right look for events and a new prestige line of products.

The next aim is to invest in more quality stock to make lavish events extra special.

Ginny said: "we are finding that the majority of hires are for large numbers of tables and chairs and people want something extra that's unique like a beautiful bar or a lounge or display area so I am going out to source some original antique pieces.

The business already has a franchise in Scotland and is considering further franchise options.

In fact, a feature about the couple in Country Living, did such a good job of portraying their perfect life that they were flooded with interest from would-be franchisees.

But they don't see the blood, sweat and tears that goes on behind the scenes, said Ginny.

The next step is securing satellite storage depots across the UK to ease logistics.

But a move from Devon is not an option, said Ginny.

"It's about the quality of life for us and the good team of staff we have now. For all that we have achieved, it is still done from an office in the back garden.

"I can be on the phone to New York wearing my riding jodhpurs with a chicken at the window.

"I like it and it means I can put the washing out in the middle of the day or take the dog for a walk, it is part of the spirit of the company"

"I see the challenges ahead as staying a cut above our competitors, so we have to continue to deliver something that little bit better, deliver a better service and something people cannot find anywhere else.

"Sometimes we cannot quite believe what we have created, it is something we are really proud of and I think that the staff feel that too."

www.virginiasvintagehire.co.uk