

# JOURNAL

FOR THE LIFE YOU LEAD

## SELF-MADE MILLIONS

from running a Walsall chip van  
to owning Hoar Cross Hall

## ALL REVVED UP

the Hairy Bikers ride  
into Birmingham

## BARING ALL



£2

## GETTING AHEAD

the Mere Green woman  
who made hats for Kylie

## YOU CAN WIN

- £1,000 of jewellery  
designed by...

# ents

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# If you want to get ahead

*Amy Walters meets the Mere Green milliner who has designed hats for Kylie Minogue and catwalk fashion shows.*

**Pictures: Caroline Strange**

**H**at-making may be seen by some as a dying art, with the demand for headwear limited to country weddings and days at the races, but for Sutton Coldfield-based milliner Gemma Holley, hats are a style statement that is here to stay. From her small studio on Belwell Lane, Mere Green, Gemma designs and creates stunning headpieces for all occasions. The

walls of the studio are adorned with examples of Gemma's work, and the array of glitzy fabrics and works-in-progress that consume her work space are evidence of a designer who is very much in demand.

With a good dose of determination and hard work, the creative 28 year-old, from Four Oaks, has turned her passion for millinery into a thriving business.

Catering initially for close friends and family, Gemma's designs soon began to capture the imagination of a wider circle of clients, and Gemma Holley Millinery was born.

"I did art and design all through school and I've always been interested in design," said Gemma. "I just love making things – I'd make everything if I could."

It was in fact jewellery, not millinery, where Gemma initially set her sights on a career. But whilst studying for a degree in jewellery and

silversmithing at Loughborough University, Gemma became disillusioned with the idea of working in the jewellery trade and turned to headwear instead.

"In my final year I started experimenting with jewellery for the head, and then other types of headwear and found it much more inspiring than what I'd been doing previously.

"When I was doing the jewellery and metal work I just found it a bit dull because I love colour and working in metals wasn't as appealing. When I started doing headwear instead I started off in metal, but soon moved to paper and plastic so I could incorporate more colour.

"You have an artistic license to go a little bit crazy with designs – I've always been into surrealism since my school days and I found that with hats there's just no limit. When I started doing headwear my tutor encouraged me to go down that route and explore it, and that was the best decision I've ever made."

Her final exhibition of creative headpieces landed Gemma a work experience placement with celebrated London milliner Stephen Jones, and it was here that she discovered her love of hat-making.

"I just completely fell in love with millinery," said Gemma. "I was working on the most fantastic pieces for the catwalks at London and Paris Fashion Weeks – really creative and crazy pieces – and it was just amazing."

As well as working on headwear for John Galliano and Dior catwalk shows, Gemma had a hand in creating some of the show-stopping designs for Kylie Minogue's Showgirl tour.

"Some of the most memorable pieces I worked on included one

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which was almost like a giant pillow, and another which was a twig frame with a scene inside it.

"Working on the pieces for the fashion weeks was brilliant; we could be working until the early hours of the morning to get things done but there was always a huge buzz about the place."

With a passion for head fashion well and truly ignited, Gemma decided to go back to college to learn her craft properly and hone her creative skills.

"Everyone I was working with had trained at Kensington and Chelsea College so I enrolled on the millinery course there one day a week, before signing up to do a one-year course."

With her future committed to millinery, Gemma started looking to add to her experience in the industry, winning work experience placements with a number of leading milliners including Edwina Ibbotson, Bailey Tomlin and the king of the millinery world, Phillip Treacy.

"It was all a bit of a whirlwind really. I learned so much working with other milliners and I loved my course – we had to create our own collection and have a catwalk show, and it was then that I knew I wanted to have my own label."

At the end of her course Gemma decided she was going to take some time out to travel the world. She had already booked her ticket when an opportunity too good to miss came knocking.

"I got asked by a company called Denbies Accessories, who design and make accessories for lots of high street stores like Topshop, to interview for a job as a millinery designer.

"I was all ready to go on my travels when I found out I'd got the job, and in such a competitive industry it was too good a chance to turn down."

However, the role at Denbies was purely a designing one, and Gemma missed being able to see her creations through to completion. "The job was just designing pieces on paper, which is not the way I'd normally work – I like to create things as I go along.

"Everything was being made at the manufacturing site in China, so I had to liaise with the manufacturers and I went over to China a couple of times to see the factory and to make a few mock-ups, but in the end I decided I wanted to get back into making the hats myself."

Once her mind was made up there was no going back for Gemma, and she left Denbies Accessories in 2006 to go it alone. Moving back home to Sutton Coldfield, Gemma rented some studio space at the Custard Factory in Birmingham and set about building up her client list.



Gemma's creations include hats and fascinators for weddings, Ascot and many other occasions.

"The Custard Factory is great, but it's got quite a 'street' vibe, which wasn't quite right for what I'm doing," said Gemma.

"A lot of my customers were coming from the Sutton area, so when I found out about the space available here in Mere Green it seemed like the perfect solution, as it would mean a lot less travelling for my clients."

Since opening up her Mere Green studio in last summer, Gemma has been inundated with requests. "I managed to fit in a trip to Singapore and was getting calls from customers all through the holiday.

"I didn't think I would be so busy so soon, but it seems the wedding season carries on all year round now."

Gemma generally asks for around four to six weeks to work on pieces, to allow her plenty of time to source the perfect fabrics and colours for each design. From start to finish, each creation needs around two to three days of solid work.

"For bespoke commissions my clients either generally have a strong idea of what they want, or they see some of the designs I've done previously and decide they want to incorporate various bits of different designs into their own pieces.

"I've done quite a few pieces for Ascot, where customers really want something wild. I get more motivated and 'in the zone' when I'm experimenting and creating pieces."

Gemma's inspiration for ideas comes from a huge variety of