



A HAT FOR EVERY OCCASION

“My mother missed having dinner with Lyndon Johnson because she couldn’t find the right hat to wear,” said Emilio Estevez. In this situation, every woman needs a helper. Make yours Get Ahead Hats.

The Get Ahead Hats showroom in Blackburn is down a narrow country road. Even your GPS will be confused by this address. Just at the point where you think you have missed it, a sign appears for Martholme Farm. This converted barn situated on the edge of the beautiful Ribble Valley is part home, and part given over to a showroom for hats of every colour and design.

Sarah Rhodes gives a warm greeting at the showroom as she ushers guests into a room in a detached building packed with gorgeous hats. Deliciously shaded grape-coloured peacock feathers sit with curls of ribbon on one creation, while a turquoise

design is adorned with swirls laced with delicately crafted turquoise and magenta flowers. An oversized white hat becomes an attention-seeker courtesy of the immense black bow set at a jaunty angle as the brim curves back on itself, and a subtle blue percher is a head turner with the addition of a grey silk sash offset with sharp silver spikes dripping with large crystalline stones. These are hats that make you want to go to the races, be the mother of the bride or meet royalty.

“Most hats are for weddings,” explains Sarah, “...but Ascot is a busy time. It depends on what part of the country you’re in as to the busy times. All of the

races are popular, as well as garden parties and investitures at Buckingham Palace.” Women often worry about buying a new outfit for a wedding, but Sarah suggests an alternative: “You don’t need to go and buy a wedding outfit but you can wear something you already own and dress it up with a lovely hat, and then you can wear the outfit again.” Smart thinking. If you think you are not a hat person, think again. There is so much variety in the range that there is something for everyone and the showroom manager can help find the perfect piece to suit you and match your outfit. There are 4500 styles to choose from within the network. “Ladies worry about wearing hats,” Sarah confides.

To find your nearest Get Ahead Hats showroom visit www.getaheadhats.co.uk

"It's knowing how to wear a hat. It doesn't have to be a full brimmed hat either... now these perchers, the half hats, are in. Some ladies just sit them straight on, but they are worn on an angle." Sarah confirms that the most important factor apart from the colour and style of a hat is the fit. "In fitting a hat, some ladies have smaller heads, some have larger crowns and we can fit them properly," she says. "Wedding hats don't come in different sizes but some are big, some are small. If it's too big we can make it fit. We put some tape inside it and fit it properly so you won't need to worry about it moving on the day. You have other things to be thinking about. You want to be able to just put the hat on and go and enjoy the day." Now that's a philosophy we all subscribe to.

Besides full hats and perchers, there is also a large range of fascinators on offer, designed to do exactly that. Whose eye cannot be captured by a combination of black netting, red silk blooms and tantalising coils, or a white curved base sprouting wispy tendrils? With a matching clutch bag, Cinderella may now go to the ball. There is little chance of running into someone wearing the same hat too, as a number of the milliners only work for Get Ahead Hats. "They make our own styles but then we do have hats like Whitely which you can find in Selfridges, Harvey Nicholls and John Lewis," says Sarah.

Sarah has noticed that each year there is a colour that is on trend. "Royal blue and different shades of blue have been quite

popular lately but Kate Middleton's worn a lot of blue," she confides, confirming the Middleton effect on fashion. "Kate Middleton, well all three Middleton ladies, have been to our store in Hampshire," Sarah divulges. "Carol, Pippa and Kate used to go regularly. She wore a hat (from Get Ahead Hats) when William got Order of the Guard before they were engaged." If it's good enough for royalty-to-be, it's good enough for me.

The business model of Get Ahead Hats is part of what sets it apart. The concept began with Beryl Otley on a farm near York and has grown to 18 outlets. Sarah started off as a franchisee seventeen years ago, then five years in Beryl asked her to join the management team. Two years later Sarah bought the business and has ran it since then, with Beryl still giving advice when needed. "She is still a mentor and is like my second mother," says Sarah. This tight knit relationship is reflected through the network. "It is a farmer's wives cooperative, all working from home," Sarah explains. "Farmers wives are often needed to be at home. They used to stay at home to make meals for a lot of farm workers. Now that isn't the case because there are not as many farmers," she continues. "Ladies have come because they need to help with the farm income or they want to support themselves and buy a few nice things for the children, rather than relying on the farm income which is falling."

While all of the showrooms are based in country areas, they are not necessarily all

on working farms. They always have plenty of space outside for customers to park, and they all provide changing rooms so that the ladies can come with their outfits.

Besides the rural location, there are other factors that make Get Ahead Hats a unique experience. This is not the average retail milliner experience. Firstly, the business is run by a farmer's wives co-operative networked throughout the UK. The women are all trained in millinery skills and a free fitting service is on offer across the 18 luxurious showrooms, all of which are in rural surroundings. A lavish hat can be an investment but if you're not ready to commit, many of Get Ahead Hats pieces are available for hire, making this an extravagance you can afford. Hiring is simple. The hardest part will be choosing a favourite. Once the decision is made it is simply a matter of booking the hat for the dates you require, usually 5-7 days, then collecting the neatly packaged hat on the arranged day and returning it afterwards.

Whether you choose a ready-made hat, or splurge on a chic couture creation, Get Ahead Hats can cater for all of your millinery needs. Feathers, beads, flowers and more. Sarah recommends taking your outfit to the nearest showroom to have a hat fitted, including your shoes as you stand differently in heels and the whole outfit needs to work together, hat included. So next time you want to look like a princess, be hatted like one by Get Ahead Hats.

