

# HATS & HAYSTACKS

In between muck-spreading and tending the livestock, a group of farmers' wives is turning heads. Melonie Clarke takes a peek



## HAT FACT

Luton was the base for all millinery output in the UK, which is why Luton Town Football Club is called the Hatters.



Stepping out of a taxi at Martholme Farm, the smell of muck-spreading is quite pungent. A working farm wouldn't normally be the first place one would think of when in the market for a delightful hat for a wedding or the races. Nonetheless, for the 18 boutiques in the Get Ahead Hats stable, it is this idyllic, country setting that sets the company apart from other boutiques.

Trying on every hat I could lay my hands on and chatting to the ladies of Get Ahead Hats in the plush, luxurious showroom (once a milking shed), it's hard to believe that it all started very humbly 25 years ago in a spare bedroom in a Yorkshire farmhouse.

When Beryl Otley's daughter was getting married in 1981 she found that when it came to buying a hat, the choice was pretty dismal. 'Bouffant hairdos were very popular in the 1980s, so finding a hat was difficult – they just weren't about.'

However, hats suddenly came back into vogue, thanks to Princess Diana. 'She brought back style and fashion and I wanted to be just like her,' Beryl tells me.

Visiting a hat shop in Harrogate led to a chance meeting that would lead to the start of her career as a milliner. 'I went to a shop in Harrogate and met a man called Philip Somerville in the hat department, who was telling the buyer in the shop that hats were back with a vengeance, thanks to Princess Diana and the Royal Family.'

#### HAT FACT

The silks for hats arrived from Milan – the men who brought them to England were called 'milaners' – hence 'milliners'.



Sarah Rhodes, the creative director

*Hot this season... Colours: navy, taupe, dusky and muted pinks, and black. Style: percher, or pillbox*

Overhearing this conversation and with her hat problem in mind, Beryl spoke to Somerville, not knowing at the time that he was milliner to the Queen and other members of the Royal Family. 'He was a lovely man. It was fate that we met that day,' says Beryl.

Following her chance meeting, she bought 10 hats, turned the spare bedroom in her Yorkshire farmhouse into a makeshift showroom and placed a small ad in her local newspaper. After being inundated with people wanting to buy or hire her hats, it was clear that she was not alone with her hat problem. 'I didn't know much about hats then, but I got to learn

more by chatting on the phone to Philip, going to London and seeing how they make them.'

With her new-found knowledge, it didn't take long for the

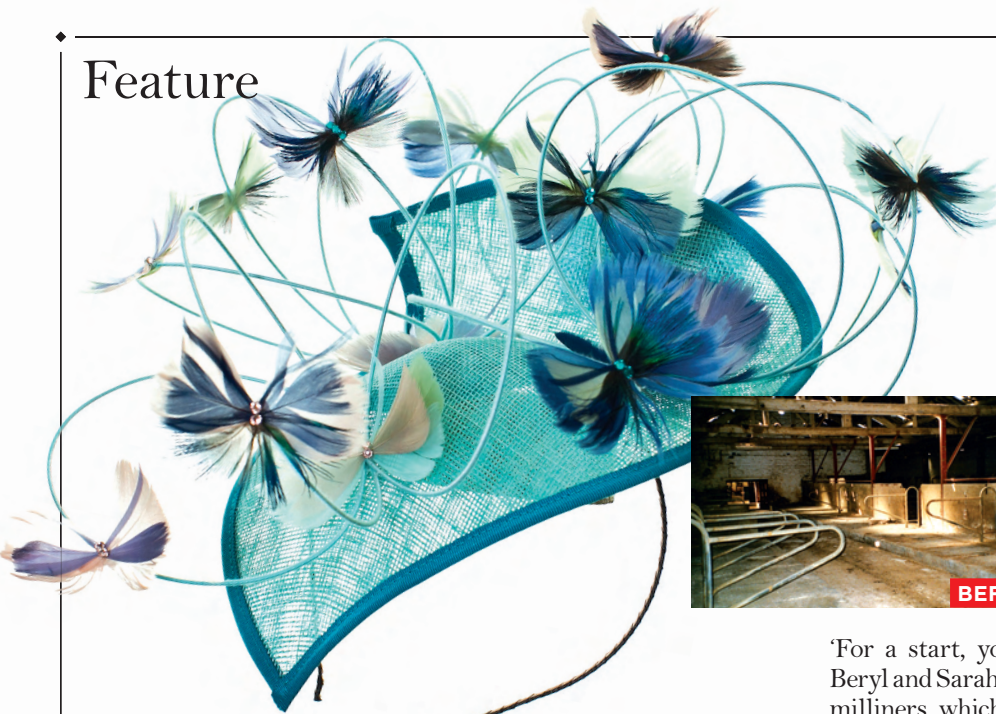
word of Beryl's new venture to spread. 'My showroom was up and running by 1986. I quickly became busy and relatively well known in the area; to the extent that our accountant said he thought I had got my books wrong because I was making too much profit. We were so used to the fact that farming profits were not very good.'

As sad a fact as that is, it is one of the things that unites the 18 women who help to run Get Ahead Hats.

The golden era of farming in the UK has long gone and is more often than not an occupation associated with long hours and poor profits. These women, who in the main tend to be stay-at-home mums (another uniting aspect) are able to bring in substantial extra income ▽







**AFTER**

Once a milking shed, now the glamorous showroom for clients of Get Ahead Hats

**BEFORE**

and build their work around farming and family life.

Creative director Sarah Rhodes, who has run the company since the year 2000, and Beryl, both agree that there is a true sense of friendship and support between the ladies who have to endure the seasonal ups and downs of farming life as well as juggling the demands of families. They tell me that during trying times, such as the foot-and-mouth crisis, their hat business has been a driving force, enabling them to carry on.

When people think of a farmer's wife, nine times out of 10, images of Doris Archer and Hannah Hauxwell tend to spring to mind. But sitting in the showroom chatting to Beryl, Sarah and the other ladies, it is clear that this couldn't be further from the truth. 'We like just as much style and indulgence as any other woman,' Beryl tells me. 'It's a bit of glamour in a dull, male-orientated environment.'

The farmyard or country setting is one of the things that sets this collective of boutiques aside from others.

## HAT FACT

**At a wedding, it is customary for men to remove their hats in church - women do not, until the bride's mother does.**

'For a start, you never have to worry about parking,' Beryl and Sarah laugh. 'We are approachable, professional milliners, which you don't get on the high street; quality, value and service in rural surroundings.'

The ladies all agree that as long as elegant women walk through their doors, they are happy. But with the Duchess of Cambridge already a fan of their hats, I wonder if there are any other celebrities they would love to welcome to their showroom.

'I like Helen Mirren, Clare Balding, and Zara Phillips - they wear hats really well,' Sarah and Beryl agree. They also believe that there are ladies out there who don't wear hats, but should.

'Samantha Cameron doesn't wear hats and she should... she could take any hat because she has high cheekbones.'

Twenty-five years on and Beryl and her team of ladies appear to be going stronger than ever. The juxtaposition between the muck and graft of farming life and the glamour of hats seems to be a most favourable combination.

♦ For more about Get Ahead Hats: 01254-889574, [www.getaheadhats.co.uk](http://www.getaheadhats.co.uk)

## HOW TO CHOOSE THE PERFECT HAT

- 1 Try it on with the outfit you have chosen to wear, so you can colour-match the look.
- 2 See what it looks like from the back view.
- 3 Don't spend a fortune on your outfit and forget to budget for the finishing touches - on your head.
- 4 You can have a very plain outfit and wear a more flamboyant hat.
- 5 You need to be able to see clearly, feel comfortable and enjoy wearing the hat.
- 6 Take a pair of heels at about the same height you will be wearing on the occasion. If you try on a hat with flats you will look different - when you step into heels you stand differently and the hat will sit at a better angle.



The milliners in their hats (Sarah Rhodes is in the blue and white top)