



‘WE LOVE THE FREEDOM OF WORKING BY THE RIVER IN AN IDYLIC SETTING’

*Boating and restaurant business owners
Vanessa Ferrett and Alex Bolton*

Originally from Kent, Vanessa Ferrett was living in Bath with partner Alex Bolton and their two children, Izzy and Billy, when a conversation (and a few glasses of champagne) at a wedding led them to a life-changing decision. ‘In January 2012, we were running a tapas restaurant in Bath and life was really frenetic,’ says Vanessa. ‘Then we came down to Kent for a family friend’s wedding. My sister Mel was there and we were having a chat about our mum’s plans to move back to the county and we suddenly decided we wanted to do the same.’

Luckily, Alex was on board with the idea, and Izzy, now 14, and Billy, who is nine, were equally excited. ‘The restaurant wasn’t very conducive to family life and we wanted to have a business that gave us a better balance. We also told Izzy that she could have a dog if we moved to the countryside, so it wasn’t a hard sell,’ says Vanessa.

So the couple set about finding a viable work/home property in Kent. ‘Soon after the wedding, we noticed that a ramshackle cottage and a small boating and camping business was for sale next to the River

Rother, not far from Rye near the south coast, so we came to have a look,’ says Vanessa.

Alex adds, ‘We didn’t fall in love with it straight away – there was mud everywhere and it was a fairly rudimentary set-up with a small house and a river boat. But we went home and started doing some research. We looked into visitor numbers to local attractions like Bodiam Castle and the Kent & East Sussex Railway and realised how popular the area is. We thought that if we could get even a small slice of the action then we could be on to something.’

However, by the time the couple decided they wanted to take the leap, persuaded by the potential of the business and its location – in a valley overlooking the steam railway line – there was another party bidding for the business, so they took matters into their own hands. ‘We pleaded with the owner to hold fire on making a decision, jumped into the car and took the kids down,’ says Vanessa. ‘The vendor was walking us around the property when he took Izzy up to the wall by the river, pointed at a tree on the other side and said, “Can you see the »

MY COUNTRY BUSINESS

The family are now able to enjoy quality time together after several years of hard graft.



What we love most...

**'IT'S AMAZING WORKING FOR OURSELVES.
WE HAVE THE FREEDOM TO MAKE DECISIONS
AND ACTION THEM IN THE SAME BREATH'**

kingfisher? There's a family of them living in that tree and you'll see lots of them when you're here." And that's the moment we knew the business was ours.'

In order to fund the move, they took a big risk by selling their house and business in Bath. But the couple were confident they could make it work – they planned to build on the boating and camping business and also open a restaurant on site. 'Although our careers began in sales, we have a background in catering. Alex's Spanish grandmother taught him to cook, my degree was in catering and we'd been running the restaurant in Bath for four years,' says Vanessa.

Just over two months after making the decision to move, Bodiam Ferry Company

was theirs. 'We got the keys in March 2012, moved in and opened for business two weeks later, after settling the kids at school and rebranding as Bodiam Boating Station,' says Vanessa. But it wasn't all plain sailing to start with. 'That first summer it just didn't stop raining. There was mud everywhere. I don't think a day went by in six months when I didn't wear my wellies,' she says.

The deluge didn't stop them making changes. 'When we took over, there were two camping bookings in the diary and neither turned up,' says Vanessa. 'Now, we are taking bookings until 2018. We also invested in two more boats for trips to Bodiam and Rye and added kayaking and rowing.'

In the summer of 2013, they set about transforming their living quarters. 'We moved out of the house and into a caravan on site for a few months while the existing Victorian cottage was knocked down and rebuilt,' says Alex. The resulting home is a charming, energy-efficient white weatherboarded house with blue shutters.

By April 2015 they had built a wood-clad building overlooking the 1.5-acre camping paddock with views of the valley and opened it as a fully-licensed restaurant, which serves fresh, simple dishes and specialises in tapas.

Vanessa says they are now reaping the rewards of their hard work. 'When there's a queue of people checking in for boats, every table is taken in the restaurant and kids are playing on the grass outside, I pause and take it in and it's really rewarding,' she says.

It has been challenging, but things are getting easier. 'Juggling everything has been tough, but our team is getting stronger all the time,' says Vanessa. 'We have finally got a better work/life balance. We love to watch the kids in their school sports matches, catch up with friends and take our dog, Oona, to the beach for walks. We have brilliant people working with us, allowing us to let go a little.'

**📞 Bodiam Boating Station, Rye Road,
Newenden, Kent TN18 5PP, 01797 253838,
bodiamboatingstation.co.uk. »**



Vanessa prepares to take out a group of kayakers.

MY COUNTRY BUSINESS



Alex takes a boat up the river to historic Bodiam Castle.



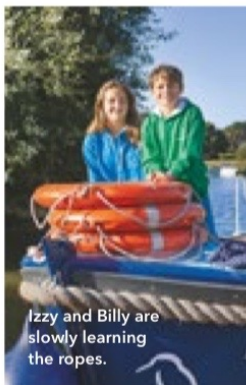
Vanessa in the restaurant, which was completed in spring 2015.



The couple have worked hard to build their brand - the logo (far right) features the kingfisher that sealed the deal.



Vanessa follows her group of kayakers.



Izzy and Billy are slowly learning the ropes.





ON OUR DOORSTEP...

Visit... 'Great Dixter (01797 252878, greatdixter.co.uk) in Northiam. The former home of writer and gardener Christopher Lloyd, it has the most beautiful gardens. It's a real oasis in these busy times we live in.'

Shop at... 'The Shop Next Door (01797 228626, thegeorgeinrye.com) in Rye for a great choice of colourful gifts and homewares.'

Go for a meal at... 'The Globe Inn Marsh (01797 225220, globeinnmarshrye.com), also in Rye. This pub has a great atmosphere, quirky interiors and wonderful food.'

The couple realise the importance of making time for one another when running a business together.

Small business advice

HOW TO WORK WITH YOUR OTHER HALF

Our guide to being successful partners in life and business



Setting up a business with your partner, like Vanessa Ferrett and Alex Bolton have done, is not uncommon. But it can be hard to ensure things run smoothly when you are living in each other's pockets night and day. How can you achieve a harmonious partnership both at home and work? Mentor, life and business coach Anita Bevan has the following advice:

Take your time with planning when setting up in business together. 'Before starting, examine the challenges you will face both at home and in your future business and devise a plan to deal with them. It is essential that you share the same passion and vision, so you need to plan your business and what you want to achieve. Identify your market, which can help you see opportunities that might not have been obvious. Who are your potential customers and how many are there? Financial planning and forecasts are essential for the survival of a business. Be sure that you maintain clear and up-to-date accounting records, reviewing them regularly to spot trends early.'

Discuss what complementary skills you can bring to the business. 'A division of responsibilities will allow

working flexibility for both parties. Clear lines of authority need to be defined, but important decisions and problems should be shared and solutions agreed together. Ensure both parties are happy with their work allocation. Pinpoint areas of weakness that you might have to hire someone to help out with.'

Be aware of the risk of a downturn in the business. 'It's essential that both partners have an agreed strategy on how to deal with difficulties. Blaming each other for problems will only jeopardise the business further. Explore ways to gain an advantage over your competitors. Recognise what you are good at and diversify where possible. Identify the key indicators that will tell you how your business is doing, monitor these closely and be prepared to take action as appropriate.'

Have a back-up plan should the business fail. 'When building your business plan, identify at the start what could go wrong and what actions need to be put in place to try to rescue your business or what options you have if it fails. Ensure that your financial assets are set up in such a way that you and your family are protected should anything go wrong.'

Remember that it is vital to make time for your relationship. 'Personal time is very important. Respect each other's breaks from work, but also be sure to organise family time accordingly. When appropriate, try to take a weekend away together. This will enable you to focus on the important things in your personal life and also come back re-energised into the business. Recognise excellence in your employees and don't be afraid to delegate some responsibilities so that your business can continue to run successfully in your absence. It's important - and beneficial - to be able to let go once in a while.'

Bear in mind that communication and trust is the essence of a strong business partnership. 'Open and honest communication should be part of a healthy relationship. When it comes to important work conversations, talk in person where possible and avoid sending texts or messages that can be misinterpreted. If you have difficulty formulating your thoughts, write them down, highlighting the main points. This will release some of your stress and should enable you to discuss things in a less emotive way.'

Anita Bevan, 07795 205747, anitabevan@gmail.com.

The one lesson we have learned...

'TAKE A CHANCE. OUR ADVICE TO ANYONE WANTING TO START A NEW VENTURE IS TO DO YOUR RESEARCH AND THEN JUST GO FOR IT. WHAT'S THE WORST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN?'