

# Start your DREAM BUSINESS

## Be an interior designer

In the second part of our new series, Sarah Osmond invites us into her stylish studio and reveals how she made the leap from city lawyer to rural entrepreneur



### SARAH OSMOND INTERIORS

OWNED BY Sarah Osmond

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### THE TALENTS BEHIND THE BUSINESS

A love of textiles, the ability to sew  
and an eye for detail

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ALUN CALLENDER

### “I’LL TELL YOU THE BEST THING

about working from home,” Sarah Osmond says as she walks up the stairs of her 17th-century house on the Cumbria-Lancashire border. “Earl Grey on tap and Radio 4 all day.” Her tea mug and radio are always at hand in the first-floor studio that looks out towards hills criss-crossed with hedgerows. So is Betsy, the one-year-old black Cocker spaniel that’s leaning against a homemade gingham cushion on the window seat. “Luckily she doesn’t shed much fur,” says Sarah of the doe-eyed pet watching over the two chickens and Welsh mountain pony that complete the family’s menagerie. A moulting dog would not be the best companion for a businesswoman whose stock includes Vanessa Arbuthnott and GP & J Baker linens and silks.

“I have always had a thing for the feel and weight of beautiful fabrics,” says Sarah, who lives with her husband Simon and their three children, aged five to ten, in the village of Priest Hutton. She grew up just ten miles from here, on a beef and sheep farm near Kendal, but left home to study law at university, eventually becoming an employment lawyer for a large commercial firm. Her transition from solicitor to seamstress began in 2002, when she and Simon were working

in Birmingham and living in rural Warwickshire. “I became pregnant with our first daughter, Liddy, and after she was born I decided to be a full-time mum,” Sarah says. Six months later, however, she enrolled on a City & Guilds course in soft furnishings at Warwickshire College. “It was partly to keep sane,” she recalls. “But it was also an investment – I knew that I wanted to have my own business one day.”

Given her creative instinct and sense of style, working with interiors was the obvious option. A booklet about rural women entrepreneurs, mounted on the cover of *Country Living* [*Start Your Own Business*, 2003], confirmed her thoughts. “One of the profiles was of an interior designer,” she remembers, “so I kept it for inspiration.”

The course took two years and Sarah spent thousands on childcare in order to attend college two days a week, getting up early to complete projects before Liddy woke up. By the time it was finished, her second daughter, Georgie, was on the way. Then, in 2005, Simon was offered a job in Manchester. Rather than relocate to a city suburb, they bought Hawkshead House, a six-bedroom wreck in half an acre of land.

With a home to renovate, a third baby, Patrick, and a husband commuting for hours each day, most women would not choose to launch a business. Yet opportunity strikes when you least expect it, and when Sarah received a request for decorating advice, she took a gamble. “I’d been making soft furnishings for family and acquaintances for years, building up my skills, but wanted more of a challenge. A friend owned some holiday cottages nearby, and asked if I could give her ideas on how to style them. I said, ‘No. I’ll give you a quote.’ My heart was in my mouth.”

So began a steep transition in which Sarah went from curtain maker to project manager, designing furnishing schemes, sourcing fabrics and, as word spread, finding local sewers to help her keep up with demand. Creating the interiors for Plato’s, a new boutique hotel in Kirkby Lonsdale, Cumbria, was a turning point. “That was my launchpad,” she says.

But Sarah chose to build the business slowly, taking on jobs – from year-long commercial projects to two-hour home-decorating consultations – that she could fit around her family. “I needed to be able to enjoy time with my children. If my >



THIS PAGE A passion for beautiful fabrics led former employment lawyer Sarah Osmond (left) to set up her own interior design business, which combines her people skills, eye for detail and talent for making soft furnishings. She also runs sewing courses at her home in Lancashire



## Kitchen Table TALENT

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clients asked to see me on a day when I didn't have childcare, I'd take Patrick along. They got used to seeing him in a backpack, dropping biscuit crumbs in my hair." Nearly six years after the launch, she still downs tools when the school bus pulls up at her front door. "How many jobs let you work from nine until three, then eight until ten, and give you an afternoon off to see the end-of-term play?"

Taking shape alongside the business has been Hawkshead House itself, as much a family home as it is a showcase for Sarah's creative skills. For the past year, it has also been a source of extra income, as a sewing school: Sarah runs courses on which she teaches beginners "who can't thread a needle" how to measure and hand-stitch lined curtains and Roman blinds. It's the perfect next step for a sociable entrepreneur who misses the companionship of colleagues and loves being surrounded by like-minded women. "My favourite part of this job is meeting new people, then working with them to turn a blank space into something that really enhances their life." *Sarah Osmond Interiors, Hawkshead House, Priest Hutton, Carnforth, Lancashire (01524 781261; sarahosmondinteriors.co.uk). CL readers will receive a ten per cent discount on Sarah's day courses (usually £105) if booked before 1 May 2013.*



## The path to success



### Biggest challenge?

Interior design is quite a closed industry. In the beginning, I asked around for advice and a couple of established designers were helpful. Most, however, weren't forthcoming with their feedback. A mentor would have been brilliant.

### What were your start-up costs?

I spent £800 on lining fabrics, curtain tape and other essential tools, £300 on a new laptop, £400 for fabric-sample books, and £3,000 during the two years when I was studying part-time and needed to pay for childcare.

### How much should you charge for a service?

I offer new clients the first hour of my time free – but never a whole consultation. My time and skills are my stock in trade and my expertise has taken years to amass, so is worth paying for. Be businesslike, not apologetic – if you value yourself, others will, too.

### What do you wish you'd known before starting?

That designing would be ten per cent of my job. The rest is IT, accounting, administration and marketing. Doing a course in business management at the start would have saved

me the time I spent trying to work it out for myself.

### Advice to CL readers?

Keep costs low while you build your expertise. I still use a £120 Janome sewing machine that my husband bought me from John Lewis and find small family-owned fabric houses at trade fairs such as Decorex International, as larger ones often charge up to £1,000 for their sample books alone.

### A secret from a well-styled home?

If curtains and soft furnishings are beautifully made, affordable fabrics will look luxurious. ▷