

# FT WEEKEND

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MAGAZINE

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The Chilean novelist has Lunch with the FT



Newspaper of the year

# Jewellery maker crafts a niche with technique and tradition

## BUSINESS PROFILE

A Hertfordshire barn is a unique 'shop window' for Harriet Kelsall's jewellery business, although most customers order online, writes Annie Counsell

The beautiful beamed barn conversion that houses Harriet Kelsall's jewellery design studio, workshop and showroom is a far cry from the humble start in a garden shed in Muswell Hill, London, where she began making items for friends, and friends of friends, before her business took off.

Glass cabinets show off the hand-crafted jewellery to perfection and there are comfortable sofas for customers to chat with personal designers about their commissions - a relaxed and warm environment that converts 90 per cent of bespoke appointments into sales.

The six in-house designers understand the individuality of each order and build relationships with customers, who are kept informed of each stage from design to completion by personal contact or by sketches sent over the internet. This process has played a very important part in kick-starting the business and generating sales.

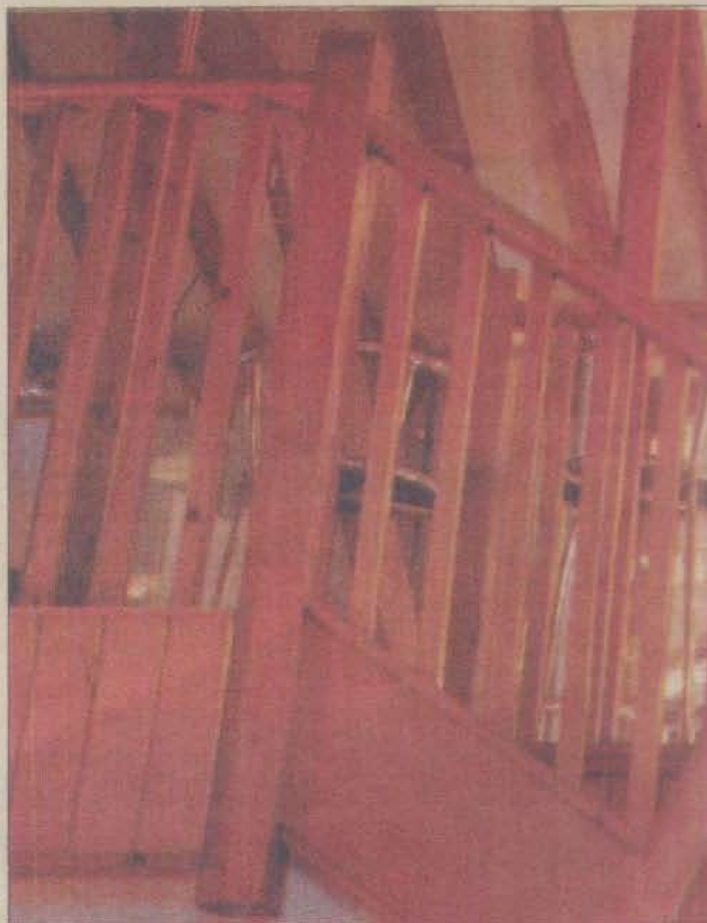
"Events such as engagements and weddings are personal and special and we reflect that in our service. For lifetime purchases, people are looking for something more meaningful than mass-produced jewellery from high street shops," says Kelsall, who is passionate about customer care, government assistance for start-ups, rural businesses, international trade in ethical gems and diamonds, the internet, her staff, the environment, Google, and signposts.

She is passionate, too, about maternity leave. As a business owner she could only have two weeks off when her son Thomas was born 2½ years ago. But the majority of her staff are women whose entitlements have been far greater than hers as a business owner now employing 30 people.

Kelsall has not had any local or government grants or assistance.

A huge boost has been what most people would consider a handicap - Kelsall is dyslexic. She says she turned this to her advantage.

"I don't think in a linear way. I am much more three-



Country comfort: of the company's barn, Kelsall says people 'like a pres-

dimensional, and had a programming background, which was useful in getting on the web at an early stage.

"We were up there in 1997. No one else had a jewellery site at that time. And we have developed the site with pictures, scanned progress reports and an online design service," says Kelsall. That approach resulted in top Google listings.

Kelsall made her first silver ring at age four, learning from her father, a doctor who made jewellery as a hobby. By the age of six or seven,

The workshop has brown 'heritage' signposts [as] a tourist attraction. Satellite navigation has also helped increase visitors

she was designing and making her own rings, but later in life didn't consider it as a career and studied environmental design at Brunel, obtaining a first-class degree.

Today, her best-selling items are engagement rings. Customers often return to purchase wedding and eternity rings, as well as other items.

Commissions for rings amount to more than 1,000 a year, each as unique as a snowflake, and the design never replicated. The commissions incorporate special

colours, stones, elements of nature, engravings or whatever may be dear to the customer's heart. This, however, went pear-shaped when Google listed in the US and changed its criteria. Kelsall's site fell from first place to about 70th place in the listings for the search "engagement rings".

Undeterred, Kelsall found Google was giving preference to information-based sites, so she introduced some ring information pages and they were back on top within a month.

Set in the north Hertfordshire countryside, the barn draws customers from all over the country and internationally as it has good road links. Heathrow, Stansted and Luton airports are easily accessible.

The traditional crafts setting is in keeping with the environs - tourists even come to the workshop to watch the jewellers cut, polish, buff, shape and form the hand-made jewellery.

Signs to the barn were a problem. The local council did not allow billboards or A-boards. The workshop now has brown "heritage" signposts since it has become a tourist attraction. Satellite navigation has also helped to increase visitors.

However, the vast majority - 94 per cent - of sales is generated via the website and by internet searches. That factor has been crucial to the success of the business, and has included numerous awards: north Hertfordshire's most success-



It makes them feel more comfortable

New Look

tal business, north Herle's best internet site, and a place in the final of the UK Jewellery awards.

A second shop was opened in Cambridge with an investment of 275,000 three years ago and has recently been refitted. Set in an urban centre, it draws more passing trade than the first, but Kelsall is firmly committed to retaining a physical "shop front" presence. In spite of the majority of commissions coming via the internet.

"People like a presence. It makes them feel more comfortable," she says.

The business has grown each year for the 18 years it has been up and running. Turnover has increased from £14,541 in 1985-86 to an estimated £1.1m this financial year.

Kelsall plans to increase turnover by 20 per cent next year by more investment in marketing and the launch of a fresh website, scheduled for May.

She has been careful about cash flow, always requesting a deposit before taking on a commission and reinvesting profits in tools and technology.

A recent headache has been fluctuations in precious metal prices. "Over the past month or so, the markets have put 200 on a platinum ring within a week," Kelsall says.

"We do not source any gems or diamonds from conflict zones. We are a co-founder of the Council for Responsible Jewellers and [we] try to source that [gold] gems... origins from outside sources. We are always in touch with suppliers to establish credentials."

In January, two new posts for marketing and sales were

formed and investment in focused on technology to run the website and to allow commissioning customers to follow the progress of their bespoke jewellery orders.

"We have grown very fast, but we haven't made any compromises because of this," says Kelsall.

"We have been very careful to focus on our customers, giving them the very best in craftsmanship and design in our traditional and high-tech way."

[www.hkjewellery.co.uk](http://www.hkjewellery.co.uk)  
[www.purple-label.com](http://www.purple-label.com)

## Ask the Experts Harriet Kelsall Jewellery Design

Michael Hoers, chief executive of the National Association of Goldsmiths, says Harriet Kelsall represents the new breed of jewellers, free from the shackles and preconceptions passed down from previous generations.

She has taken a fresh look at the business of selling jewellery - by taking it out of the traditional confines of the high street shop, responding to the individual desires of her customers through bespoke work, and by matching her customers' lifestyle aspirations, she has secured herself a place in the minds of her client base.

With the exception of premium watch brands,

jewellers have been slow to appreciate the positive effect that brands and design marketing can have on sales. Trends that have made the top line reported by playing on their customers' desire for "authenticity" and "meaning" from the jewellery they buy, and have promoted designer identity above all else.

Howard Huchley, partner for Grant Thornton, an accountancy firm, likes the fact that Kelsall is segmenting the market through her website by using different labels for dress jewellery and bespoke items.

However, he is not convinced of the need to

have the shop in Cambridge, with all its overheads and costs and demands on Kelsall's time, when so much of the business is conducted via the website.

Investment in the website and enabling customers to follow the progress of their jewellery online is a good avenue for a business reliant on the internet. The next challenge will be managing further growth, say 50 over 50 staff, and he encourages her to have a clear set of goals for profitability.

Rupert Mason, partner at BDO Stoy Hayward, says many artist-entrepreneurs who succeed in getting their businesses off the ground need to invest

whether they want to work for their business or whether they want the business to work for them.

Those who are in love with their art will find that the management demands of a larger business will get in the way of what they really love doing.

One challenge that artist-entrepreneurs often struggle with, Kelsall has evidently managed to overcome - a reluctance to recruit more people into the business and make it less dependent on her. With six designers and over 30 staff, she has made the break. The question is, what she wants to take the next step and invest in management to develop her business further?