

HENLEY

henleylife.co.uk | February 2026

Life

All you
need is
LOVE...

Featuring

Perfect recipe for Valentine's, Winter Weddings and much more

School of the month



THE ORATORY

"In a crowded Berks/Oxfordshire school market, The Oratory is a distinct alternative and one well worth a visit."

The Good Schools Guide 2026

The Oratory is delighted to share highlights* from its new review from The Good Schools Guide, who visited the school in November:

ACADEMICS *"Recent academic initiatives have wielded strong value-added results, topping the leaderboard in select subjects and groups."*

The Oratory is placed in the Top 25% of schools nationally for value-added at GCSE and A Level, and in the top 10% for girls at GCSE. This year, two of our U6th pupils have received offers from the University of Oxford, with a further two interviewed and awaiting outcomes from University of Cambridge.

PASTORAL CARE *"GOLD standard pastoral care."*

The Oratory remains, quite deliberately, small enough that we can know every one of our pupils, and families choose us for the



warmth of a smaller school. Think of us as a Greenhouse, where growth and flourishing happen naturally, enabling pupils to be themselves, yet become more.



SPORT *"Punching above its small size, The Oratory features superb facilities... notably in sports and the arts."*

Our 1st XI hockey team and 1st XV rugby teams are reigning Berkshire County Champions. Oratory hockey has won their league five times in a row now, and the 1st XV rugby team has retained the County Cup. Oratory pupils also currently hold the U18 National School Real Tennis Singles Championship and U13 National Schools' Doubles titles. The Oratory sport programme is strengthened this year with an All-Weather Pitch.

Discover The Oratory at our next Open Morning:
Saturday 7 March.



THE ORATORY

"GOLD standard pastoral care."

The Good Schools Guide 2026

"We chose The Oratory because it is a small nurturing school where the individual really matters." An Oratory Parent

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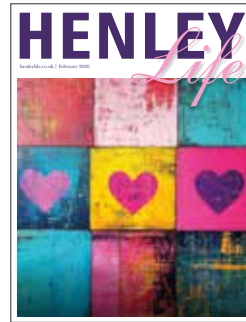


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WOODCOTE, OXFORDSHIRE

HENLEYLife Contents

February 2026



COVER PICTURE:
All you need is Love

HENLEY
Life

HENLEYLife is a Baylis Community Media CIC publication, hand delivered to more than 10,000 homes in South Oxfordshire and Berkshire

EDITOR Phil Simms

psimms@henleystandard.co.uk

SUB-EDITOR/FEATURES WRITER John Jacklin

john9jacklin@yahoo.co.uk

DESIGN & PRODUCTION Nick Hughes

nhughes@higgsgroup.co.uk

FASHION & BEAUTY Amanda Stewart

amandastewart@henleylife.co.uk

ENTERTAINMENT Natalie Aldred

naldred@henleystandard.co.uk

ADVERTISING SALES

Abi Streeton

astreeton@henleystandard.co.uk

Piers Thompson

pthompson@henleystandard.co.uk

Karen Lamming

klamming@henleystandard.co.uk

Judith Toner

jtoner@henleystandard.co.uk

ADVERTISING ENQUIRIES

CALL 01491 419419

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HENLEY
Life

Free monthly lifestyle magazine for local residents, businesses and visitors.

CIRCULATION INFORMATION

10,000 copies are hand-delivered to homes in South Oxfordshire and Berkshire each month and into high footfall areas and outlets by our professional team. Another 1,000 copies are available to pick up in many establishments across town and are also available at most Henley events. We can also deliver on request to an out of area business/event.

- Henley on Thames RG9 – 5409 copies • Caversham RG4 – 1433 copies
- Sonning Common RG4 – 1533 copies • Wargrave – RG10 1251 copies
- Shiplake RG9 – 487 copies • Peppard Common RG9 – 254 copies

Pop into the office at 1 Station Road, Henley, for your copy.
Don't miss out as they go fast!

FEBRUARY is the month of love and this edition has that at its heart.

Laura Barber, from Henley, tells how she will join about 60 business trailblazers on a 1,000km journey across India in a tuk tuk. She will embark on the Sisterhood Rickshaw Rally to support transformative women-based grassroots projects in Chennai.

John Jacklin interviews Louise Colam, the community engagement co-ordinator at Henley YMCA, about its history as the town's original wellbeing group and how it has championed the welfare of young people for 170 years.

For those thinking of popping the question or for couples planning their big day, we have a series of winter wedding features that could help. Amanda Stewart speaks to events planner Lavinia Stewart-Brown and top toastmaster Patrick Collins.

Emma Dodd speaks to the founder and members of Blended Wellbeing, a women's social group set up a year ago to help combat loneliness and, for those who like nothing better than curling up with a good book, Vanessa Holburn tells of her anthology of true stories of women from history.

February is also National Heart Awareness Month, so our women's health columnist, Dr Shilpa McQuillan gives some advice on how to look after it while Ian Massey, one of the founders of Rotherfield United walking football club, tells of its success.

Finally, Laura Hewitt, co-owner of Lawsons Goldsmiths in Henley, is the subject of this month's My Henley Life.

We hope you enjoy.

The Henley Life team



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Rickshaw Rally

to raise money for grassroots projects

BY ALEX CARTER



A WOMAN from Henley will join around 60 business trailblazers on a 1,000km journey across India in a tuk tuk.

Laura Barber, 44, founded brand strategy and storytelling firm The Ripple Impact last year and will embark on the Sisterhood Rickshaw Rally on February 28.

The team will make their own travel arrangements to the starting point in Chennai before they start the seven-day fundraiser to Panaji in Goa around International Women's Day.

Through donations and sponsorship, it is hoped that £350,000 can be raised to support transformative women-based grassroots projects in Chennai.

These funds will be used to build safe, weather-resistant classrooms, empower young women with skills training and improve maternal healthcare.

Mrs Barber, who has self-funded the £2,500 trip, will undergo training in Chennai before travelling through Vellore, Bangalore, Mysore, Mangalore and Bhatkal, before reaching the final destination. This will prepare the women for the challenging road conditions they could encounter.

Ms Barber said: "It will be an incredible journey with three women in each tuk tuk, taking on India and supporting each other to get across the long distance in the blistering heat and dusty road, all while trying to navigate heavy goods vehicles, cows and the lack of road rules."

Despite having travelled to more than 60 countries, she anticipates a "culture shock".

She said: "I've been very fortunate to have travelled either personally or through work but I've never been to India.

"The people whom I have spoken to have said it can be quite a culture shock in the developing country, which has such extremes of wealth and poverty. Whether that be children begging and hitting themselves on the side of the road to get money or dead and decaying

animals, it can be quite extreme and an assault on the senses." Ms Barber, who was born in Africa and moved to Holmfirth in West Yorkshire when she was six, has previously worked on girls' empowerment and domestic violence awareness in Zambia.

"Africa is the closest country I know of culturally to India," she said. "There are parts where you will have cities with developments like bus stations and airports but everything in between is just dusty roads and shacks with people selling you local goods to try and make a living.

"Because of this, I've always been a supporter of women and particularly children. I've done things in Zambia to help support girls with empowerment and domestic violence."

Mrs Barber believes in giving those in the emerging and developing countries in southern Asia a chance at education and safety. She said: "We are so lucky in this country and I think unless you experience a third-world or emerging country, you can't really appreciate it.

"The fact that they might not even have a safe classroom means their abilities will be limited in education. To be able to create this is an incredible thing as it takes them away from potential abuse and neglect, which is really important to me."

She is most excited to meet the locals, especially in the schools they are supporting, to witness the direct impact of the funds and sponsorship.

Mrs Barber said: "I've loved living in Henley for the last seven years as I think it has a lovely sense of community.

"Taking my love for community and bringing it across the seas to other local people and kids in schools we're supporting is a wonderfully exciting thing to be doing — I hope we get to see the difference the money is going to make during our journey."

To donate or sponsor, visit sisterhoodchallenge.co.uk/news/goa



Formative years: Laura Barber with her sister Victoria in Africa, where she grew up and, right, volunteering there as an adult

Diary Dates

FEBRUARY 2026

**THURSDAY 5TH FEBRUARY TO
SATURDAY 4TH APRIL**

Cash on Delivery

**THE MILL AT
SONNING**

Written by Michael Cooney, son of Mill supporter Ray, this fast-paced comedy is packed with mistaken identities and cover-ups. Eric Swan has taken thousands of pounds of fraudulent DSS money, helped by uncle George, but wife Linda remains oblivious. DSS Inspector, Mr Jenkins knocks on the door and meets lodger Norman Bassett. From this point on, nothing is straightforward, as an undertaker, bereavement counsellor, psychiatrist, mysterious Ms Cowper and a washing machine enter the scene.

For more information, visit millatsonning.com

FRIDAY 6TH FEBRUARY

Oye Santana

KENTON THEATRE



They won the 2018 National Tribute Music Awards and Oye Santana will be playing the music of Carlos Santana at the Kenton Theatre in New Street. Including songs such as Maria Maria, Oye Como Va, Black Magic Woman

and Smooth, this tribute band will be celebrating the Latin-infused tunes of the Mexican-American guitarist. Tickets cost £27.75 and the show starts at 7.30pm.

For more information, call the box office on (01491) 525050 or visit thekenton.org.uk

SUNDAY 8TH FEBRUARY

Henley and District Theatre Organ Trust presents Michael Wooldridge

HENLEY TOWN HALL



Littlehampton organist Michael Wooldridge is known for playing on BBC Radio 2's The Organist Entertains and has played for the then Prince Charles at the Odeon Leicester Square. He loves all kinds of music and will be playing classical, rock 'n' roll and much more at the town hall. The concert starts at 3pm (doors open at 2.30pm). Admission is £10 (cash at the door) and includes refreshments.

For more information, call David Rusman on 0118 972 4988 or visit www.henleyorgantrust.org.uk

**WEDNESDAY 11TH TO
FRIDAY 13TH FEBRUARY**

HoT Podcast Festival

**KENTON
THEATRE**

Three nights of live podcasting are coming to the Kenton, from Goodfull Media, the team behind last year's show An Audience with the Movers and Shakers. On Wednesday, in Travel Secrets: The Podcast with Tanya Rose, Tanya will talk to Christopher Biggins about his globetrotting adventures, while Simon



Williams and wife Lucy Fleming will reveal stories behind the Goldeneye Estate in Jamaica and their family's travel history in the Second World War. Thursday is Made by Mammams: Mums' Night Out, with Zoe Hardman and Georgia Dayton, with guests including Georgina Bradley from Hunted. Friday's podcast is the first ever recording of The Eternal Optimist, with Ollie Phillips and Sophie Storm Roberts.

For more information, visit thekenton.org.uk

SATURDAY 14TH FEBRUARY

Rebecca Poole — Romancing the Song — Valentine's Special

KENTON THEATRE



Sultry jazz singer Rebecca, who grew up on the Nettlebed Estate, will be performing the greatest love songs of the jazz age, along with self-penned numbers. Music will range from romantic ballads to feelgood swing, Americana and moody blues and more.

For more information, call the box office on (01491) 525050 or visit thekenton.org.uk

MONDAY 16TH FEBRUARY

Nettlebed Folk Club presents SykesMartin

THE VILLAGE CLUB, NETTLEBED

A collaboration between Miranda Sykes, of Show of Hands, and Hannah Martin, of Edgelarks and the Gigsparner Big Band, the duo will present a set of songs that take them back to their shared



roots. They share an ear for harmony and instrumental improvisation, combining old songs with new ideas.

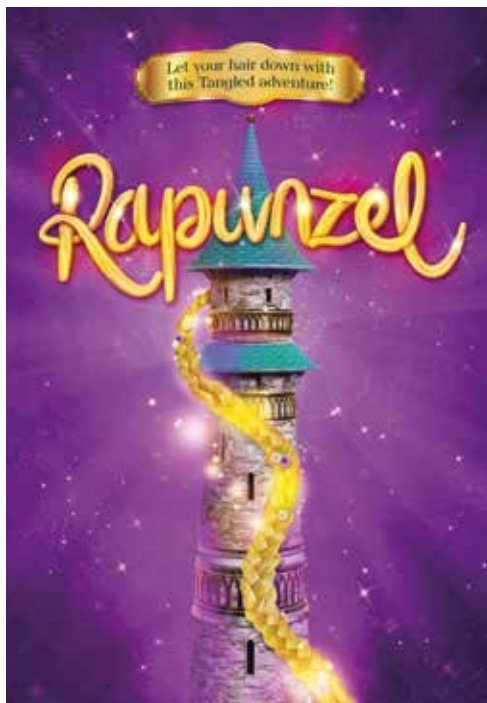
The evening starts at 7.30pm and tickets cost £19 in advance, £20 on the door from nettlebedfolkclub.co.uk

**FRIDAY 20TH TO
SATURDAY 21ST FEBRUARY**

Immersion Theatre presents Rapunzel

KENTON THEATRE

The team behind the award-winning, sold-out panto Peter Pan have created a hair-raising adventure telling the



old fairy tale of Rapunzel but with new musical twists. This family favourite has plenty of audience interaction and catchy tunes plus eye-catching outfits and snazzy scenery.

For more information, visit thekenton.org.uk

THURSDAY 26TH FEBRUARY

Honk! Henley comedy

THE RELAIS HENLEY



Sara Barron, Joe Haddad and Shalaka Kurup are on the bill for February's live comedy evening, described as "the world's most comfortable comedy club". Sara has appeared on Live at the Apollo, 8 Out of 10 Cats and Would I Lie To You?, while Joe is a London-born Palestinian comedian with 1,001 tales of his upbringing and Shalaka is an Indian stand-up comedian living in London, known for her sharp, observational humour.

For more information, visit linktr.ee/honkhot

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Henley's hidden gem

The YMCA rightly sees itself as the original well-being hub after 170 years serving people of the town

BY JOHN JACKLIN



THIS year is on course to be a year of change for a charity in Henley that can lay claim to being the town's original well-being group after 170 years of championing the welfare of young people.

Following a change of leadership last year Henley YMCA is joining forces with other members of the association in neighbouring counties under the banner One YMCA to help it take a more expansive role in the community.

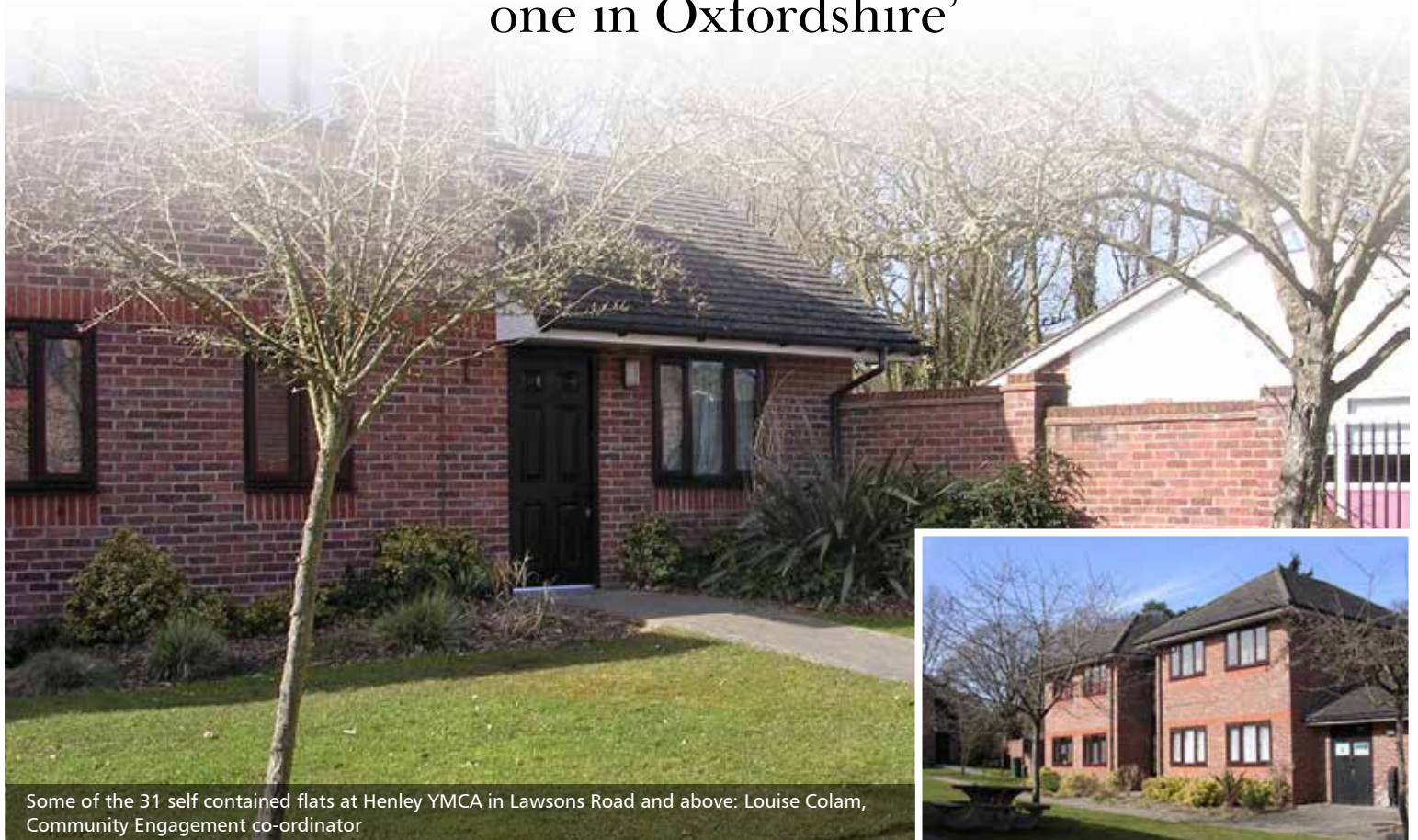
The site, in Lawson Road on the west side of town and called

by one member of staff a hidden gem, has plans afoot to update its pavilion, build a new residents' lounge and to create a well-being woodland walk, community vegetable patch and areas of seating in its green spaces.

Louise Colam, the Community Engagement co-ordinator at the Henley YMCA says: "It is one of the oldest and largest charities in the world, the YMCA, so it's a huge concern both worldwide and in Henley. It was established in the town in 1857 and is the only one in Oxfordshire."

George Williams, who had left Somerset for London to learn drapery, founded the YMCA in 1844. Williams held prayer meetings and Bible studies in his lodgings with other young drapery assistants who shared a Christian faith. The group grew to help all young men, regardless of faith, who were

'It is one of the oldest and largest charities in the world, established in the town in 1857 and is the only one in Oxfordshire'



Some of the 31 self contained flats at Henley YMCA in Lawsons Road and above: Louise Colam, Community Engagement co-ordinator



LEFT: Volunteers helping with the gardening club, focusing on creating green spaces for well-being.
ABOVE & RIGHT: The function hall available for hire and used by many community clubs.



YMCA

alone and lonely in the City of London. “With this in mind they decided that the organisation should take the inclusive name of the Young Men’s Christian Association and not the more restrictive Young Christian Men’s Association. This principle of inclusion remains central to the philosophy of the YMCA’s work,” the group says.

Louise, who lives with husband Stuart and their three children in Paradise Road, Henley, says: “It was essentially a Bible study group when teenagers were working in factories, with possibly no hope and no prospects and so that’s where it was birthed from. It was set up in Henley only 13 years later and it became more than just a Bible study group. They started to aim to develop every young person in mind, body and spirit.

“So, it was a kind of the earliest, if you like, well-being hub. You know, what we would call a well-being hub was the YMCA then — and now. It’s kind of the original thing. It grew from that to being a place where people, particularly the homeless, could find a safe place to stay. We have 31 self-contained affordable and supported flats here in Henley where young people between the ages of 18 and 30 can come. And it’s not

‘They run a life skills course and a job club where lots of our residents will access those courses which are free’

just young men, it’s young women too. In fact it is everybody and anybody and I think that’s the positive way that the YMCA has grown. It’s so inclusive but there is still a Christian ethos that runs through its core.

She adds: “There is support to help people if they don’t have work and they don’t have the funding to move into their own property, we help them make sure that they can apply for the right benefits and then we help them on a journey to things like work, independent housing and including their well-being and their spiritual growth as well as those practical things.

“We do a gardening club, we’ve got a really great relationship with Christians Against Poverty. They do a lot of debt coaching but they also run courses. So, they run a life skills course and they run a job club where lots of our residents will access those courses which are free. They are free for the whole community, too, but because of our relationship with Cap we do get some of our residents on that. We also have a football field maintained by Henley United and a five-a-side pitch used by the only disability football group in Henley.”

By October last year the YMCA, which hosts classes such as yoga, pilates, seated exercise, veterans table tennis, dance classes and a community larder for the Henley community, had “helped ten young people into independent accommodation and nine

into work”. “The three things we try to do is opportunity to belong, contribute and thrive.”

In December the YMCA helped a teenager who had moved from the Midlands. “They were sharing a room with somebody who had significant mental health problems. They’d moved from Birmingham and just needed a safe place of their own. So we were able to offer a room, a safe space here. We take

Cont’d



Five-a-side football pitch and full-size grass pitch also used for other community events.

care leavers, so 18-year-olds who have been in care and at 18 they no longer have that space. We sometimes hear from the local authority about people who are looking for a safe place.”

Although Henley is viewed as an affluent town, it’s wrong to think that people don’t need services that the YMCA offers, Louise says. “There are people in every location where actually home doesn’t feel a very safe place and over the last couple of years here in Henley, I’ve spoken to young people who are living in fear at home.

“One young lady I spoke to was living in her car because she didn’t want to live at home and in those situations you go ‘actually there is a YMCA here in Henley’. The more people that know we are here, then the more people locally we can help get back on their feet.

“We have some very generous contributors locally who help us to run certain projects but the larger things like the housing costs and the maintenance, we rely on rental, you know, the people pay rent to live here but ... we are quite cheap in comparison to others.”

Part of the YMCA’s remit is akin to after care. “We do

have targets in terms of helping people into independent accommodation. We obviously don’t want to release anybody into homelessness. We want people to go into independent living from here.

“So, we keep tabs on their progress, my colleague is just collating an operations report all about how many people we have helped through courses. So, we try to measure our impact by keeping track of what support we’ve offered. We can keep tabs on how many of our tenants have engaged with local support, how many of them get jobs and then how many move on to independent housing.”

Louise adds: “We’ve had quite a lot of standout success stories. So I was working as a social prescriber before working here full-time and at the time I knew there were places at the YMCA and I’d had a conversation with this one young man. He is autistic, in his twenties, and had to leave his home because of an abusive relationship with his father, so he fled that home and ended up moving in with his sister and then ended up moving in here at the YMCA.

“He joined the gardening group and he then also went on a life skills course through Christians Against Poverty and the

Job Club and then he got a job at the town council parks and he now holds that job and he’s just really, really loved working here and he is always happy to contribute. He will often mow our lawns for us or help out in other ways. So, that’s a really great success.

“There was a young guy that moved in here after leaving the care system and really struggled with his mental health for a long time but through support here, counselling and Charlotte, our housing manager, who supported him with form filling in and help with different things that he

needed to do, his mental health improved.

“He got a job, did very well there and he has moved out with a girlfriend to Swindon. So, he’s living independently. There are lots of stories like that and I think people just aren’t aware that the need is there like it is.”

Louise does not envisage a name change for the YMCA to something along the lines of Young Persons Christian Association. “I see what you mean, but because YMCA is such a well-established charity, a well-established name, a well-established brand, there’s an understanding that actually

the YMCA is here for everybody, men and women. Here at Henley we’ve got half and half, half guys and half girls living. And that’s a good thing.”

She adds: “Our heart is to serve our local community.”

‘There’s an understanding that actually the YMCA is here for everybody, men and women’... ‘Our heart is to serve our local community’

www.henleymca.org.uk

Having a ball

Weddings and parties for two thousand people mean work is big fun for events planner Lavinia Stewart-Brown

BY AMANDA STEWART



THE wedding and events planner Lavinia Stewart-Brown started her creative life in the media, notably working on the picture desk of GQ, the men's fashion magazine.

She has worked in events for 14 years and started her own agency in 2018. Lavinia Stewart-Brown Events is based in Henley, where she lives with her husband and family, but its reach extends across the world.

Lavinia, 38, says: "We are a boutique wedding and events agency and it is a completely bespoke service, ranging from a dinner party for five, to a children's party for 20, a wedding

for 150, and a charity ball for 2,000. I adore what I do and love meeting people and helping them plan an unforgettable event, big or small, that they will always remember and will leave them smiling.

"Although I run events and weddings across Europe and the UK, I am so fortunate that I have built a lovely local client base as well.

"I love how much Henley has to offer — the peaceful river, beautiful scenery and having the pleasure of working with some amazing local suppliers (Lucca Studios, who design stunning stationery, and the photographer Gabrielle McMillan, who hails from Henley) and I feel so lucky to be able to plan events here and beyond.

"The majority of my weddings and events are held at family homes in marquees, which offer a stunning blank canvas to

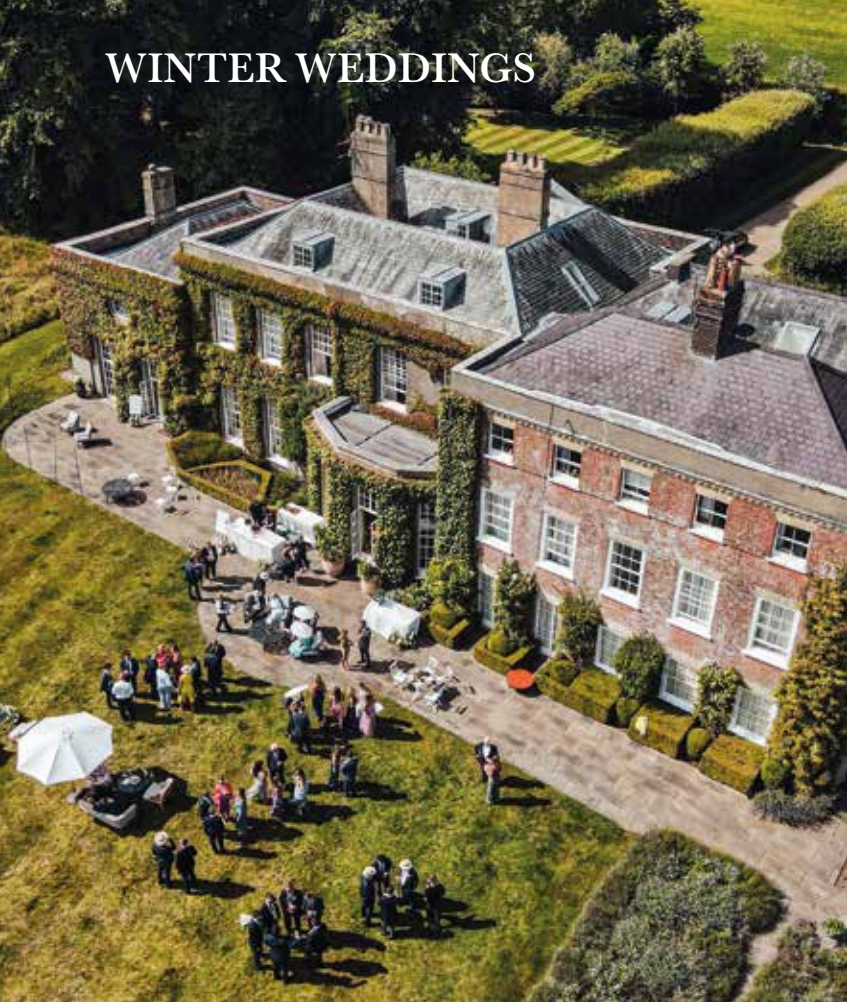
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'I love my job as it provides me with another opportunity to be creative and think outside the box, no matter what the budget'



Lavinia Stewart-Brown is used to planning parties for large numbers of guests, along with phenomenal artists to perform at her clients' private events

WINTER WEDDINGS



Some examples of the exceptional venues, and experiences created by 'Lavinia Stewart-Brown Events'

work with which means no two weddings are the same.

“My weddings do seem to have a slight running theme, which is very floral based, and we create a space which brings the outside in. Regardless though, every event is still different, which is why I love my job as it provides me with another opportunity to be creative and think outside the box, no matter what the budget.

“As a business, customer service has always been paramount to me, and I always ensure my clients feel comfortable and at ease when working together. We build a strong relationship and I feel so fortunate that my clients continue to recommend me to their friends and family. I have grown my business organically, from planning three sisters’ weddings over five years, to a 50th, 60th, 18th and 21st for the same family. These long-term relationships are what have allowed my business to grow in the way I had dreamt of when starting out.

“I have also booked some phenomenal artists to perform at clients’ private events over the years, including the singer Olly

Murs and the comedian Michael McIntyre, and more recently, some of the cast of Strictly Come Dancing for a charity gala.

“I have always had a love for the creative world. When I moved to Henley in 2020, I was eager to immerse myself in the local creative scene where possible.

“Being given the opportunity to work for Henley Festival has been an incredible experience alongside my own business — the festival team is wonderful, and it’s been great to witness talented artists and dynamic entertainers perform.

“It’s inspiring to see the festival grow from the initial planning stages to the moment it all comes to life over those five days, and the team are so passionate about making it a memorable occasion for the thousands that visit each night.

“Having my own business has allowed me to get involved in events such as Henley Festival. I have loved being involved and watching the impressive line-ups of not only musicians but also art, comedy, and family activities, while also building connections with locals and businesses.”



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Trained by the Queen Mother's toastmaster, he has successfully presided over more than 500 weddings

BY AMANDA STEWART



OYEZ, oyez, oyez — toastmaster and town crier helps more than 500 couples start their married life with style.

That is the proud boast of Henley resident Patrick Collins, who added the title toastmaster to his list of talents following his own wedding more than ten years ago.

Patrick, 63, says: “After a wonderful wedding at Stoke Place Hotel in Buckinghamshire, I mentioned to them that I was looking for something to do. Their answer [after the formalities of the wedding and Patrick’s speech] was why don’t you become a toastmaster, we think you would be incredible.

“So off I went to get trained at The Executive Guild of Toastmasters and Town Criers to be taught by Peter York, the late Queen Mother’s toastmaster. Having passed my exams, I was ready to find work.”

He adds: “And, having just got married, the role of the wedding toastmaster was a natural one to follow alongside formal dinners. My background in sales helped me as I was used to presenting in front of groups, and the coffee shop I used to run had grounded me in the importance of good customer service and the importance of connecting with clients and engaging with them.”

Patrick acknowledges that the training he had received in becoming a toastmaster gave him the structure of what he needed to say and when to say it in his role.

“I then made the decision early on to work through venues rather than seek work from individual people. This gave me a number of bookings once I had become the preferred toastmaster of a venue and exposed me quickly in weddings

large and small, for different faiths. “Every wedding is different; every couple is unique and it’s ‘how’ you bring your skills to their day.

“A toastmaster is a charismatic project manager for the day, who understands exactly what it will take to run the day effectively and pleasantly, set the scene, make announcements and move the guests around as the day unfolds.”

Patrick adds: “We are the interfaces who bring the best out of the suppliers chosen by the couple, keeping them informed and onside. We are also the person the bridal party turns to for reassurance, a few calming words and keeping it fun.

“Since I started in 2014, I have been the toastmaster at more than 500 weddings.”

Patrick grew up in Pangbourne, along the Thames in Berkshire, and was a pupil at Pangbourne College. He has a passion for boating on the Thames and travelling around rural Spain where he and his wife have a small house.

Although he was football mad as a schoolboy, after his education he became a disc jockey. He says: “I did that for

‘Every wedding is different; every couple is unique and it’s “how” you bring your skills to their day’

two to three years and decided that I needed another career as well, which led into various sales and management roles in the computer networking business, which I enjoyed very much. But in 2003 I was made redundant and became self-employed.

“My life has turned into a portfolio life since then, usually combining two or more strings to my bow. I have imported Moroccan furniture, owned a coffee shop and set up an employment law business.”

And “by accident” Patrick became involved in property development via the Salisbury Club, on Queen Street in Henley, the street where he lives with his wife Claire.

“The Salisbury Club was in some financial difficulty and were being circled by property developers who in my view totally undervalued the property and a deal that they were proposing would very possibly have led to the closure of the club sometime in the future.

“As a member I wanted a fairer deal and put forward a proposal that would benefit the club and keep it alive. Part of the deal involved the land opposite Christ Church being developed and I used the Henley architect Chris Tapp, who came up with an amazing design for which we won planning permission on appeal.”

Patrick adds: “Property development is not for the faint-hearted and there were many times I wondered if I had bitten off more than I could chew. The main contractor went bust and that led to a 22-year fight with the liquidator and getting the build finished.”

Patrick adds: “Once the build was finished my coffee shop lease also came to an end and it was time to see what the next chapter was going to bring. I had leased out the shop that I had built up and that of course gave me some income. I had met my now wife Claire and we had decided to get married.”

At that juncture in his life, Patrick moved into the contrasting world of crafting his skill as a toastmaster. He says: “For me the most important attribute is emotional intelligence as without that you will never spot myriad emotions that are present on the day. The ability to keep calm under pressure is a very useful skill as is to always have a plan B and C up your sleeve.”

He says: “I love my job. The best thing about it is experiencing the amazing emotion, experiencing the very special day, the satisfaction of a job well done, value added to the day and new friends made.”

Patrick’s work means he travels to “fantastic venues” such as Cliveden, the National Trust mansion near Taplow in Buckinghamshire; Hedsor House, also in Buckinghamshire, Stoke Place; Easthampstead Park, a Victorian mansion in Bracknell, Berkshire; and Blenheim Palace, in Woodstock.

“Typically, the radius I cover is roughly two hours from my base in Henley,” he says.

His years as a toastmaster and wedding party host have not gone unnoticed. He says: “I have won quite a few awards as a toastmaster, being a guide for brides finalist for five years and a national winner in 2024. I was also the President of the Executive Guild of Toastmasters in 2024.”

He adds: “We are always looking for new entrants to the guild for those people who think they would enjoy it. The cost of training starts at £1500 and the uniform is from £800 upwards.

Patrick — whose attire is a traditional uniform of red tail coat, black trousers, patent shoes, white bow tie and Marcella dress shirt — says that a toastmaster is present at an event specifically to enhance the occasion and they are not there to be a showman or be overbearing.

He prides himself on having a style that is friendly and professional and is able to ensure that there is a framework to the wedding that smooths the way for the day.

Part of his role is to settle those tricky wedding questions about protocol and etiquette, such as who makes a speech and in what order? Who proposes a toast and to whom? Who should be in the receiving line? When do you cut the wedding cake? Patrick usually arrives an hour before a wedding to



Patrick Collins on duty in his traditional uniform, and left, his official chain of office as Executive Guild of Toastmaster and Towncriers

check timings with suppliers and the leading guests. After the wedding service he greets the bride, bridegroom and guests and will guide them into the venue. He can help the photographer organise the guests, and if you have one, announce your guests to the receiving line prior to the wedding breakfast.

With 500 weddings under his belt proceedings could not be expected to always go smoothly. “Things are constantly changing even on the day,” Patrick says. “The ability to shuffle the schedule around is ever present and sometimes things do go wrong.

“Here’s an example: one bride refused to cut her cake unless there was live music playing, yet no live music had been planned for the cutting of the cake.

“So after hearing what she wanted, I announced a change of plan, which was to move to the dance floor in another room where the band were setting up and thus could provide the live music.

“Even so for the first dance, the cake trolley got stuck in the lift for thirty minutes and having announced cutting of the cake for a second time, the cake trolley rolled off the dance floor because it had been set up on a slight slope.”

He smiles: “It was not a great moment, but we still all got a piece of cake — even though the smooth running of the day was anything but a piece of cake.”

CROOKED BILLET February Kitchen

PAUL CLEREHUGH, CHEF/PROPRIETOR, THE CROOKED BILLET, STOKE ROW. 01491 681048



Valentines

ST. VALENTINE, the patron saint of restaurateur & florists is upon us this month. Saturday 14th February, book a restaurant? Perhaps staying in is the most fool proof option — it helps is you can cook of course.

Not all of us are in a position to pull off a romantic dinner at home, particularly if there are flatmates, parents, teenagers or a flatulent labrador in situ. Whilst many 'first daters' would crack under the pressure of cooking Valentine's dinner — your date should be the star of the evening. Food a close second. However, many have it engraved in their mind that if they're not taken somewhere marvellous on Valentine's Day then he/she/they don't love them.

Restaurants, book in advance. Saturday 14th is one of the busiest nights in a restaurant's calendar. Incidentally, chefs & restaurateurs prefer Valentines to fall on a Monday/ mid-week as they're usually fully booked anyway on a Saturday. Perhaps consider booking a leisurely luncheon reservation — possibly a more relaxed experience — although people watching at dinner is more entertaining.

Gentlemen, make an effort in the wardrobe department. Girls will carefully consider clothes, makeup & shoes to go out — not to impress the chap they're with, but the woman on the next table.

Perhaps cooking at home is the preferred option — create your very own piece of paradise & buoy yourself up on pink champagne without paying the restaurant mark up! If you can cook — it helps!

Your dinner date is priority — THE most important element, however the food needs to be on point. Can't



have your date sending the meal back/ complaining/demanding a refund. Unlikely, they'd want a complimentary return visit 'on the house'. Nothing sexy about a bad chef, 90% of great food is good shopping — quality ingredients will win you all the praise. Plan your menu — cook something your date loves, not necessarily what you fancy. All food prep completed in advance. You're ready, shirt ironed, anecdotes polished, champagne chilled, Twiglets in place before the doorbell chimes.

Don't go too cheesy with those assumed aphrodisiac ingredients: asparagus, figs, chilli, chocolate, oysters etc (I'm partial to oysters — attached recipe). By all means, drop a few of those flowery menu words into the conversation: sticky, succulent, sizzle, finger licking, drizzle...

A dozen oysters shared between the right companion hopefully the making of a sensual experience. Best check first though — anaphylactic shock & an epi pen would take the edge off your evening.

Slurping a slippery, salty oyster, eaten raw, naked, fleshy & wet — long complex flavour — tastes of your lover's tears.

CROOKED BILLET Baked Oysters, Shallot, Leek & Cream

Ingredients (serves 4)

- 75ml x cream
- 75ml x dry white wine
- 100g x finely chopped shallot
- 100g x finely chopped white leek
- 50g x butter
- 6 x rock oysters
- Salt & freshly ground pepper

Method

- Melt the butter in a medium sized pan, add shallots & leeks until soft but not coloured.
- Add the white wine & reduce for 2 minutes.
- Then add cream & reduce for a further 2 minutes, season.
- Meanwhile, remove the oysters from their shells, pouring the juice into the cream reduction.
- Preheat the oven to 180°C/Gas 4. Wash shells & return oysters to their shells.
- Sit the oysters in a roasting tin using raw rice/ dried beans to make them sit upright.
- Spoon the creamy reduction over each individual oyster. Bake for 5 minutes until the oysters are firm & a golden colour. Serve immediately.



Catlin Ltd

Improve your home with Henley's award winning construction company



ESTABLISHED in 2013, Catlin Ltd continues to deliver high quality projects in the residential sector across Henley-on-Thames, with its commitment to excellence now recognised at a regional level.

Founded by Daniel Catlin, the company has earned a strong local reputation for trust, reliability and consistently high standards of workmanship. This is evident by the company being Members of the Federation of Master Builders (FMB). Catlin Ltd later received a 2 page write up in their monthly magazine.

In 2023, Catlin Ltd's pursuit of excellence was recognized by the Local Authority Building Control. The company were nominated and then later awarded "Central region Highly



Commended" at the LABC Building Excellence Awards for Best Individual New Home. The awarded project was for the construction of the first Passivhaus in Henley on

thames and celebrated the delivery of outstanding quality.

Catlin Ltd works closely with clients who want to improve rather than move. From light-filled kitchen extensions to carefully considered renovations, each project is tailored to enhance space, functionality and lifestyle while respecting the history of the home.



CATLIN
MASTER BUILDERS OF
EXCEPTIONAL HOMES

Daniel Catlin
Director

info@catlinltd.co.uk
07786 743663



WOMEN'S
HEALTH

By Dr Shilpa McQuillan,
accredited menopause
specialist, GP and
community gynaecologist

Matters of the Heart

FEBRUARY is National Heart Health Awareness Month, a time to focus on something that often goes unnoticed but affects every woman: our heart health.

Much of women's health advice focuses on managing the symptoms related to menopause and conditions such as endometriosis and PCOS. But while we're busy managing what we can see and feel, there's something happening quietly inside the body: changes that can increase the risk of heart disease.

Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is a general

term for conditions that affect the heart and blood vessels, including heart attacks, strokes, and narrowing of arteries. One of the tricky things about CVD is that it can develop silently. For example, high cholesterol contributes to the build-up of fatty plaques and narrowing of the arteries, but because high cholesterol doesn't cause visible symptoms, it often goes undetected.

Why is this particularly relevant for women? It's well known that as we age, heart disease risk rises for everyone. But for women, the risk seems to accelerate around menopause. This is partly due to falling

levels of oestrogen. Oestrogen receptors are found in cells throughout the body, including the heart and blood vessels. This hormone has a protective effect in several ways: it helps reduce "bad" cholesterol (LDL), increase "good" cholesterol (HDL), and keep blood vessels flexible, which helps manage blood pressure. When oestrogen drops, those protections lessen.

Menopause also changes how we store fat. Fat that once sat around the hips, giving a "pear-shaped" figure, often shifts to the abdomen, creating an "apple-shaped" body. This abdominal or visceral fat is not just

'It's well known that as we age, heart disease risk rises for everyone. But for women, the risk seems to accelerate around menopause'



cosmetic; it wraps around vital organs like the liver and stomach and is associated with higher risks of diabetes and heart disease.

It's not just menopause that affects heart health. Conditions like endometriosis, PCOS, and PMDD are increasingly recognised as inflammatory or hormone-driven disorders. Chronic inflammation, pain and stress can all contribute to weight gain, fatigue, and unhealthy lifestyle choices. Over time, these factors can quietly raise the risk of heart disease, even before menopause begins.

Even menopause and hormone-related symptoms themselves such as hot flushes, night sweats, low mood, and poor sleep can indirectly affect heart health. Poor sleep and low motivation often lead to reduced exercise, stress eating, and other habits that contribute to weight gain and high blood pressure. Some women may also notice palpitations or an irregular heartbeat. While often harmless, persistent palpitations should be checked to rule out underlying heart issues.

PREVENTION IS KEY

I can hear the sighs — another thing to worry about. But there's reason women's health experts are highlighting heart disease for women: while it's serious, it's also largely preventable, and now is the perfect time to take action.

HERE ARE SOME OF MY KEY TIPS FOR A HAPPY, HEALTHY HEART:

Stay active: Exercise is one of the most effective ways to protect your heart. Aim for 150 minutes of moderate activity or 75 minutes of vigorous exercise per week. Even moving regularly throughout the day is proven to help maintain weight, blood pressure, and mental wellbeing.

Eat a heart-friendly diet: Focus on vegetables, fruit, whole grains, lean protein, and healthy fats. A Mediterranean-style diet is excellent for controlling cholesterol, blood sugar, and weight. Avoiding processed foods, high sugar, and saturated fats also makes a big difference.

Look after sleep and mental health: Poor sleep and stress increase blood pressure and inflammation. They also make unhealthy eating and inactivity more likely. Supporting mental wellbeing is as important for your heart as physical activity.

Know your numbers: Keep track of your blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, Body Mass Index (BMI), and waist



‘While it’s serious, it’s also largely preventable, and now is the perfect time to take action’

circumference. Understanding these results can help you take action before problems arise. You may not be familiar with what each number means, but your specialist can help explain your risk and what steps to take.

Quit smoking: Smoking directly increases cardiovascular risk and can worsen menopause symptoms such as hot flushes and night sweats.

Consider hormones, including HRT: Hormone replacement therapy (HRT) can ease fluctuating hormone and menopause symptoms like fatigue, low mood, and joint pains, symptoms that may otherwise contribute to weight gain or inactivity. Evidence also shows women who start HRT within ten years of menopause, or under 60, may have a lower risk of heart disease. Transdermal forms (patch, gel, or spray) through the skin are particularly safe for women concerned about clot risk. Women who experience early menopause (before

45) are especially advised to discuss HRT and other hormonal support with their doctor.

MY TAKE-HOME MESSAGE

Heart health in women is influenced by menopause, hormonal and inflammatory conditions, lifestyle, and overall wellbeing. By focusing on healthy habits, staying active, eating well, managing stress, getting good sleep, keeping on top of your health checks, and seeking appropriate medical support, women can protect their hearts and improve overall wellbeing.

If you're unsure where to start or need guidance, speak with a specialist—we're here to help.

Dr Shilpa McQuillan leads the Berkshire Menopause Clinic in Henley and is an accredited menopause specialist, community gynaecologist and women's health GP.

For more information, email info@berkshiremenopausedclinic.com or visit www.berkshiremenopausedclinic.com

Secrets & Lives

Some women move in a parallel existence where their hidden world is stranger than fiction, as new book reveals

BY JOHN JACKLIN



THE real-life Second World War adventures of a woman linked to Henley and a campaigner against child sex abuse are revealed in an enthralling new book that casts light on the hidden lives of women across the world.

The paperback is an anthology of true stories from women who for the most part have to keep sections of their lives shielded and spans woman

covertly fighting the Taliban in Afghanistan to a Christian minister involved in Shamanism and kink and fetish relationships to the world of weight-loss jabs.

The book, *Secret Women, What We Hide and Why*, is a series of intimate conversations with some interviewees speaking about their hidden lives for the first time and many remaining anonymous for their safety and that of others. According to the author, Vanessa Holburn, some women choose anonymity to avoid being judged by society.

Vanessa says that her latest non-fiction book “comes from my background in writing real life features for magazines and knowing that everybody has a story and you know, in some cases, those stories are secret.

“The majority of the women are given a fake name and any background details that you’d be able to identify them from have been changed. So they are protected and when people are protected, something that they have kept secret they are quite willing to talk about.”

Vanessa, 56, says that the first section of the book, about activism and campaigns, has a section that deals with “some survivors of child sexual abuse, domestic abuse, and sexual assault survivors” in which she has interviewed Emma Jane Taylor, a survivor of sexual abuse and now a

vocal advocate for people who have been abused. The actress Sam Beckinsale, who suffered years of domestic abuse at the hands of her partner, is also interviewed for the book.

Vanessa says: “*Secret Women* is written with the women’s own voices, you know, their own stories.

“And then obviously, I’ve added some context, some statistics that bear out what they’re saying. But mostly it’s their stories.

“And while that might have not been what I conceived for the book to begin with, once I had spoken to these women I actually felt that it was their stories in their own words that mattered.

“They talk about things like the shame that they dealt with, the societal shame, and why they didn’t speak up at first, and all those kinds of topics.”

She adds: “In a section called work and self-development, I speak to the sister of a lady who was a wartime Bombe operator. The Bombes were the machines that British cryptologists used to help decipher secret messages

that were encrypted by the German’s Enigma machine.

“She was part of the Bletchley Park set-up. She kept her war stories secret until she was in her 80s. But her sister, who is 13

‘An anthology of true stories from women who for the most part have to keep sections of their lives shielded’



A selection of some of Vanessa Holburn's other books

years younger than her, so still alive, lives in Wargrave. And I spoke to her about what it was like finding out that your sister had all these secrets and that she never really got to speak to her much about them. Their parents never knew that this was a role that their daughter was taking on in the war.

"That is so very interesting because people didn't show off about the war in those days. I think they felt that they had to be quite modest. They had signed the Official Secrets Act as well, which they adhered to."

Vanessa, who is a mother of two and lives in Twyford, says: "In the section for activism and campaigns, I speak to some women in Afghanistan who are rebels, political rebels there, and the secret network they have for moving against the Taliban's many, many restrictions on women, and young girls. These mothers are particularly concerned about things such as a lack of education or healthcare for young girls."

She adds: "I also speak to animal activists who carry out some of their work in secret because they sometimes find themselves in very intimidating situations. As you can imagine, the people that are responsible for animal abuse are often not people that you would want to know where you live, or other personal details."

Vanessa talks to private investigators and a lady who was a mystery shopper about the need to be discreet in her work. She says that some of the investigators' discretion is because of the people that they are helping, who need to remain unknown. "Other times it is for their own safety," she adds. "And that is quite revealing. A middle-aged woman can pass quite undetected in places where a man, if he was trying to investigate something, might be more noticeable, he might seem more intimidating or suspicious."

The secrets are two elements in a chapter called adult content and the professional mistress. Vanessa says: "Obviously some women are not only keeping a secret about what they do

for a living, but they also keep the secrets of the people that come and use their services."

In the third section of the book, called personal relationships, there are four chapters: Lesbian Lives; Secret Love Affairs; Kink and

Fetish Relationships; and Hypersexuality as a result of Incest. The subject matter could so easily be sensationalised or trivialised but Vanessa allows her interviewees to talk in an undramatic way.

"So I speak to a lesbian couple who for a long period in their lives were in denial about their sexuality and they were married to men. One drowned her sorrows in alcohol. It's interesting to see how the secret, just hiding their sexuality, in that instance affected their lives, what happened, and a couple of secret love affairs, why people have got into that, why they didn't speak up."

"There are also people that are into the kink and fetish scene and another lady who speaks about hypersexuality, which is a modern term for being a sex addict or a nymphomaniac, which was a result of incest. So in some ways she's a survivor, but it's interesting how she feels, or how she knows women aren't judged for having a sexual habit."

The final section, Vanessa says, is about being oneself. "I talk to women who follow witchcraft and the occult, but, you wouldn't know that if you walked down the street and saw them. They are not dressed in pointy hats and stuff like that.

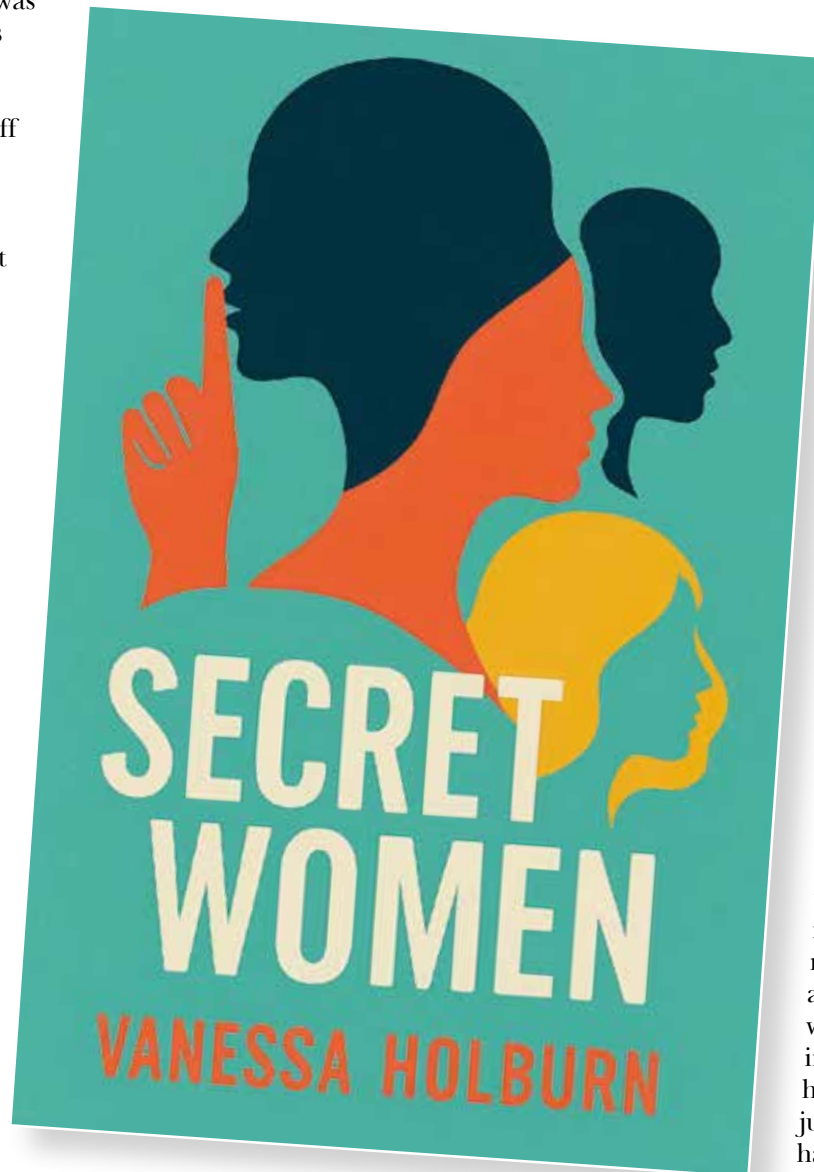
They know that they need to keep those beliefs secret.

"Likewise, a woman who is actually a church minister, but she does practise neo-Shamanism. She knows very well the church does not accept that kind of thing, but she

finds it helps the people that come to her for help. And so she combines it."

Vanessa also talks to women about their neurodiversity and mental health and asks why they feel the need to keep their

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The subject matter could so easily be sensationalised or trivialised but Vanessa allows her interviewees to talk in an undramatic way



Vanessa at various book launches and signings and outside the Bell Bookshop in Henley town centre.

‘It is comforting, that sense of sisterhood, if you like, that women are prepared to talk about these issues’

diagnosis secret. She speaks to women who use the weight-loss jabs in secret about their fears of being known to use such products.

“So some of the book is quite serious, but there are comedic aspects of it as well. I suppose, overall, I’m looking at reasons of why do women particularly have to keep secrets and sadly it’s often for their own personal safety.”

She adds: “A lot of the women that I spoke to felt they wanted to share so that if somebody younger than them, for example, was reading the book they would know not to do as they have done, not to keep a secret that can drag you down, that can isolate you, that can prevent you from perhaps getting the treatment that you need or living a life to its fullest.

“And it is comforting, that sense of sisterhood, if you like, that women are prepared to talk about these issues.”

Are women better at keeping secrets than men? “I don’t know that they’re better, but I think they probably need to

keep secrets more. Personal safety is right up there, being the physically, typically physically smaller gender and living in a society where there is recognised problems with violence against women and girls.

“You know, that that is an aspect of being able to keep yourself private and secret and discreet that perhaps men don’t need to.”

Vanessa is candid when asked whether she has kept secrets herself? “I wouldn’t say no,” she smiles.

Secret Women (River Light Press) is available from all good bookshops.

Her other books include: The Amritsar Massacre: The British Empire’s Worst Atrocity; How To Pick a Puppy; Surviving the Holocaust and Stalin; How to Be an Activist; and The Profumo Affair.

Prescription football

Doctor's health pitch gets the ball rolling for walking soccer team

BY JOHN JACKLIN

A VISIT to the GPs' surgery proved to be the genesis for a walking football club that this year celebrates 10 years of success on and off the playing field.

Ian Massey, one of the founders of Rotherfield United walking football club, had told his doctor during a consultation that he thought he had injured himself while playing walking football.

The doctor needed an explanation of what walking football involved and declared 'I think that's the sort of thing we should be involved in', Ian explains.

"He then suggested how we went about setting it up," he says. "Because he believed there were significant physical, social and mental health benefits."

With the doctor's prescription "we kicked off the process

with a chat to the Sonning Common Health Centre practice manager Andy Tidswell, who had been a football referee and was, and still is, the chairman of Rotherfield United.

"Andy saw walking football development as part of the community role of Rotherfield United and offered Bishopswood, the club's home as a venue," Ian says. "Andy designed a poster to display on noticeboards around the area, advertising a couple of walking football taster sessions in the summer and autumn of 2016.

"This did attract a few people, and we had several sessions with three or four aside. It was a slow start, but I was convinced that if we persevered it would work. The word spread and by that November we had recruited 11 or 12 players and we began to organise ourselves properly, such as the best day and

Cont'd

'In May 2017 the club, which has players aged 55-80, reached the semi-final of its first tournament'





time to run the sessions and agreed the costs. “At the beginning of 2017 we really got going with an influx of new players, all as a result of word of mouth and we were soon able to play regular six-a-side games once a week.”

In May 2017 the club, which has players aged 55-80, reached the semi-final of its first tournament — with kit borrowed from Rotherfield’s regular first team. More tournaments and more semi-finals followed. “It was tremendous progress over a very short period of time,” Ian says.

It was fitting then that the growth and development of the club after 10 years should be immortalised in a film by the Grammy nominated music video producer Howard Greenhalgh, who has created videos for such big music names as Elton John, George Michael (Jesus to a Child), Pet Shop Boys and the Spice Girls.

Howard was intrigued when his friend, club member Drew Mann from Binfield Heath, told him about the walking football club and the fact that it also had a band – The Bootboys.

After a few months periodically filming the football and other events, followed by a week of editing, Howard produced “a high-quality and highly-professional promotional video that blew members

away and captured the ethos and values of the club”.

The footballers meet twice a week to play, but also hold social gatherings, awards evenings and music events, which all play a key role in another significant aspect to the club — raising large amounts of money for local and national charities.

Last month walking footballers handed out a total of £7,415 for charities from money raised during 2025 from the special events and match subscriptions, when members pay a pound per game for the club’s nominated charities for the year, which are chosen by the members themselves. The total included

£4,200 from a charity music night and £2,115 collected from match fees and events such as a golf day, several ale trails and a race day at Newbury.

The walking footballers gathered at Loddon Brewery in Dunsden during their regular post-match social to present two cheques, one to Steve Allen representing Prostate Cancer UK, the other to Richard McQuillan and Mary Norris from the Fish Volunteer Centre, the registered charity run by volunteers that provides support services and community transport for people who are elderly, infirm or disabled in Sonning Common and



elsewhere in the South Oxfordshire area. Barry Stevenson, who took over as club chairman from Ian Massey, says: “Last year was amazing in terms of charity fundraising because we increased the amount we collected by more than 50 per cent.” In 2024 the players had been raising money for the British Heart Foundation and the Royal Berkshire Hospital cardiology unit.

Ian says: “One of the things that we have always wanted to do is to be as supportive of the local community as possible, so the club has always had the charity support element to activities, particularly for charities that are supportive of some of our members, such as Fish.”

Rotherfield Walking Football club is open to all and players of all abilities take part. The game is similar to regular football but generally involves small sided teams and is played, by definition, at a slower pace with a strict policy of no running, no physical contact and no footballs over head height. Some members have never played football before, others are returning to the game, sometimes after many years, and others have stopped playing walking football but remain active in the social side and in supporting the club. With no set season the twice-weekly sessions — with warm-up and muscle stretches — continue all through the year. Even during the winter there can be 30 plus hardly members turning up to play with only the severest weather halting proceedings.

Before starting to play in games, members have to sign up with the club, and are required to disclose any medical conditions they have — a defibrillator is brought to every session. The club registers players with the Oxfordshire FA for a cost of £10 a year and this provides insurance for injuries incurred while playing.

One club member, who asked to not be named, says: “There is a lot of banter and it is absolutely brilliant fun. I hadn’t played football or competitive sport for forty years but just being out there on the pitch casts me back to my glory years and puts a spring in my step. Every week I look forward to playing, having a gossip with the other blokes and even getting muddy when we play on the grass pitches — my wife says it brings out the child in me.”

Analysis of members who still play by Ian Beale, the vice chairman, shows that 42 per cent of the total number of players are in the age range 65-70, with the next largest group those aged 70 and above, at 32 per cent. As of last September the number of people in the 60 to 65 age range had fallen by eight percentage points to 18 per cent over the past year and the number of players aged under 60 had fallen six percentage points to eight per cent. Despite a jump in the number of players joining the club, Ian Beale says: “While this is good news for the size of the pool of players for our over 70s league squad, it does show that we need to recruit more new younger members.”

On the non-football agenda this year, besides a tenth anniversary get-together, the pub crawls, games nights, social



evenings, golf days and cycle rides, is the Dave Robinson Memorial Music Event at the Flowing Spring pub in Playhatch on May 17. Dave was the club’s former health and welfare officer who died last year after his health deteriorated rapidly. He was known for “his enthusiasm, dedication, humour, personality, doing so much to shape the culture of the club” and some of the 40 members who attended his funeral last

year formed a guard of honour. The music day is part of the club’s plan to keep his memory alive. All proceeds from the gig go to Blood Cancer UK. The first band is scheduled to take to the stage at 3pm.

Ian Massey said: “It is the involvement of the membership that makes the

club so successful. I am especially proud of being associated with the development of Rotherfield walking football club and long may it continue. We are more than a team — we are a community.”

That sounds like just what the doctor ordered, gentlemen.

Prospective members are always welcome to come to a session to watch, meet some of the team and see if it’s right for them. RUWFC hold sessions on Monday evening at Highdown School in Emmer Green from 4.45pm and on Thursday mornings at either Bishopswood Sports Ground or Rivermead Leisure Centre. Contact the Secretary via email: wf@rotherfieldfc.com.

‘One of the things that we have always wanted to do is to be as supportive of the local community as possible’

Women's social group that helps to combat loneliness

BY EMMA DODD



A WOMAN from Benson who set up a social group said that loneliness and social isolation pose a serious health risk.

Tracy Hammond set up Blended Wellbeing in February last year to create a space for women who were in need of friendship and companionship.

The group has 75 members and ages range from those in their forties to those in their eighties.

She said she was inspired to set up the group after coming across a statistic that said loneliness was as harmful as smoking 15 cigarettes a day. Ms Hammond, who has experience hosting events when her ex-husband was in the armed forces,

has previously worked as an event organiser, wedding planner and personal assistant.

She said she wanted to use her experience to create a group that was inclusive.

"I'm an ex-RAF wife of 25 years and 14 of these were overseas," she said. "I was always the one organising things because when you're overseas you're away from your friends and family and it can be quite lonely, especially if you're living in a new area."

After qualifying as a health coach a few years ago, Ms Hammond said she was unsure how to put her qualification to best use.

She said: "I then began to research loneliness and found that loneliness is detrimental to both physical and mental health.

"Then on the Wallingford Facebook page, a lady posted that she was lonely. She had no friends and she was looking for

'The group has 75 members and ages range from those in their forties to those in their eighties'



Friends: Ms Hammond, second left, set up the group last February



TOP LEFT: The group hosts monthly coffee meetings,
TOP RIGHT: Members try their hand at pottery during a workshop
RIGHT: Members of Blended Wellbeing enjoy a night out at Drag Queen Bingo, which founder Tracy Hammond described as a highlight.

a group to join.” The post received about 140 responses and Ms Hammond said that after reading it she felt compelled to do something.

She replied to the post saying that she ran a group although she didn’t at the time.

“So, I had to think up something quickly,” she said. “I thought, ‘Thank goodness I have these PA skills’.”

The following week she created a landing page and set up an email marketing system.

By the end of the week, she had 120 people sign up to her mailing list. The group officially launched on International Women’s Day in March last year.

For the first meeting, Ms Hammond said eight members turned up and now the meetings regularly feature around 30 to 35 people who come to the monthly coffee meetings.

The group also hold walks every week, hosts a book club and arts and crafts workshops as well as trips out. Ms Hammond said: “It’s just lots and lots of things to get women together. To get them talking, bonding, making new friends and just being part of a very supportive community. It is just incredible.”

The programme of events is co-ordinated through an app, Spond, and Ms Hammond charges £10 per month membership to oversee the organisation.

Ms Hammond, who lives with her partner Mike and has two grown-up children, said that those within the group had reported a real difference in their life quality since joining.

She said: “We had a Christmas party and I had one lady who joined and her words were, ‘I was crushingly lonely’.

“She lived on her own, she’d lost her job and her mental health was in her boots. “At the weekend she just came up to



‘The group also hold walks every week, hosts a book club and arts and crafts workshops as well as trips out’

me and said, ‘Your group has completely changed my life — it’s my lifeline’.”

Ms Hammond said she was surprised by the diversity of life experiences among the women the group has attracted.

She said some members were “empty nesters”, others were widows and some were seeking company after experiencing loneliness while working from home.

“I was amazed at the people that are there,” she said. “I thought we would just attract people who want to do a little bit more because their husbands don’t.

“So loneliness affects a lot of people and people are finding it very hard to make friends.”

Ms Hammond said it was hard for those later in life to find a community to join.

“Since the covid pandemic, people are struggling to make friends,” she said. “We don’t go to work now in

our age group; we’re not at the school gate.

“Confidence gets a bit knocked with the menopause. I’ve been there. I know what it’s like to be divorced and on your own.

“There are all sorts of reasons why, but they’re pulling together and when somebody’s particularly low, they’re posting on the group.

“In this community of 70 women, everybody is so supportive. And for your health, to be part of a supportive community, to be out doing things and being socially connected and having a purpose is so, so important.”

Family disputes over mystery gifts

DISTRUST and anger can arise when family members discover that an elderly relative made “gifts” to other members of the family before they died. It is too late for the deceased to explain and there may be no clues to their intentions. If the deceased was suffering from dementia or had a particularly close relationship with the recipient, it may be necessary for a court to decide if the gift was valid.

We have seen an increase in such disputes at Mercers. This may be because there are good reasons for making gifts to younger relatives, the most obvious being to save Inheritance Tax but sometimes, as people live longer, they want to help a child at a time when they need it.

To make a valid gift, consent is required. You cannot give consent if you lack sufficient mental capacity. The degree of capacity required for a gift depends on the relative size of the gift. A modest gift, for example, £100 to a grandchild on their birthday, requires a very low level of understanding. Gifting your only property requires a high level of capacity.

A person may consent and yet the gift would be invalid if there was undue influence. There is a presumption of undue influence when there is a relationship of trust and the transaction calls for explanation. It is possible to make a gift to a trusted love one but



you should ensure there is evidence to show the gift was made freely (or in legal jargon, to rebut the presumption).

If you are thinking of making a substantial gift, we recommend that you seek legal advice. It is also important that you take advice on the tax implications.

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Laura Hewitt

CO-OWNER OF LAWSONS GOLDSMITHS, HENLEY

LAURA Hewitt, 40, is a goldsmith experienced in fine jewellery craftsmanship, who before her training travelled through Australia, New Zealand and beyond. She completed her apprenticeship at the Holts Academy of Jewellery in Hatton Garden, and became the managing goldsmith at Gowan Jewellers. Now a co-owner of Lawsons Goldsmiths in Duke Street, Henley, Laura combines traditional craftsmanship with personal service.

1 What brought you to the Henley area and why do you stay?

Henley has been part of my life for as long as I can remember. My father rowed in the regatta for Leander, then Upper Thames, and even now, at 77, still rows. When my role at Gowan Jewellers ended, the opportunity at Lawsons Goldsmiths arose and I jumped at the chance to relocate here.

2 What would you change about Henley?

It would be lovely to see more independent shops and to re-educate people about the experience of shopping locally and the value that independent businesses offer - expertise, craftsmanship, and genuine relationships that can't be replicated online.

3 How do you spend your leisure time locally?

I have a one-year-old, Rowan, and a three-year-old, Ivy, so much of our time is spent walking along the river, feeding the ducks, and enjoying the outdoors. We're National Trust members and love visiting Greys Court, taking boat trips on the Thames, and attending local playgroups like Junior Jivers.

4 What are your top three local haunts?

Greys Court, Mill Meadows, and the local pubs for a proper Sunday roast — particularly The Little Angel, Bistro at the Boathouse, and The Dog and Badger. That said, we probably spend most of our time at d:two in Market Place, it's a child-friendly café with lunch boxes and babyccinos that my daughter adores.

5 Do you have a favourite song?

I love a bit of everything. I'm a big fan of classic sing-alongs from all genres.

6 Which film or play has inspired or moved you the most?

Going to the theatre is something my sister and I love to do together. Les Misérables is probably the most moving production I've seen. I'm moved by films based on true stories, such as Lion.

7 What do you treasure most about life in the UK?

The history, from Neolithic sites to the incredible architecture of London, and the many world-class museums that are free to visit. I love the network of rivers and our ability to travel by boat, and the sheer variety of beautiful places to explore.

8 If you could live anywhere else in the world, where would it be?

New Zealand. During my travelling years it was by far my favourite country, so untouched, with environmentally conscious towns powered by hot pools, wind turbines, and solar energy.

9 Is there anyone, or anything in the area that you particularly admire, would recommend or think deserves a mention?

There are many people I admire. I'd like to mention Simon Lawson, the ambassador of Lawsons Goldsmiths, as well as the Trinity Church volunteers — particularly Lucy Brewster, the vicar's wife. She does so much for the

community, from donation-only Junior Jivers to free sleep-support groups at Henley Library, giving so much without expecting anything in return. I also admire the supportive community of retailers, the council for their efforts to improve the town, the quirky boaters with their barges, and the wonderfully welcoming Henley mums.

10 What did you want to be when you were a child?

I've always loved being creative. I looked up to my sister, who is 11 years older than me — she studied art and travelled the world, which inspired me greatly.

11 Which things do you wish you had known when you were younger?

To stop worrying about what other people think.

12 Which three people would you choose to have dinner with, if you could?

The Queen — an incredible woman; my mum, who was always my greatest support and source of advice; and the Dalai Lama.

13 Where do you like to travel to on holiday?

My husband's brothers live in America and Norway, and each year one of them organises a big family holiday somewhere in the world so we can all be together. We love Cornwall, Devon, the New Forest, Robin Hood's Bay, in North Yorkshire, and Wales.

14 What are your ambitions?

I want Lawsons Goldsmiths to be a destination jeweller, offering Bond Street-level quality, craftsmanship, and expertise, right here in Henley.

15 Do you have any regrets?

No. Life is too short.

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